朧月夜

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……④

Oborodukiyo
When Hikaru was on the earth

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She is Tsuyako Udate—
The prettiest, triumphant
red weeping cherry that
stands tall in the garden.

「一度だけでいいんです。わ……わたしの彼氏のふりをしていただけませんか」
左乙女葵
「あたしが好きだって言ったこと、忘れてるでしょう！」
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「赤城くんに、わたしの恋人になってほしいの」
右楯月夜子

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Prologue

At the moment you saw your ‘most beloved’, your expression looked languish and hesitant.
For you who loved every single flower, and was the owner of them all, it was the only flower you could not touch.
You were so demure in the face of that flower, foolish, despicable, fragile—but you became so pure it was maddening.
You always gave your all to all the flowers who expressed their love for you, never asking for any repayments. However, that was the only one you yearned for with your entire soul.

Hikaru,
Your sin…
Your most—‘beloved’…

Chapter 1

“The Chinese Trumpet Vine certainly is a fickle flower . Under the clear summer blue sky, its green vines will grow wildly upon trees, walls, and bloom bright orange flowers! The Chinese Trumpet Vines were originally plants that grew on the ground, but sometimes, to show its affections for a Pine tree, it would twirl its vines upon the branches, grow towards the sky, and bloom. However, its fickle-mindedness means that it will occasionally climb upon the nearby Cedar and Cypress trees, making the Pines jealous.”

Lessons were still proceeding as Koremitsu scowled at the cellphone. Hikaru, as per usual, was talking about plants above him with the usual sweet effeminate voice.

The elderly male teacher was standing at the podium, teaching English, but his slow monotonous tone was enough to render anyone drowsy. Koremitsu’s eyes were not closed however; they were blazing, his eyebrows were raised as he scowled.

(!!! THAT’S ENOUGH–ALREADY!!!)

He grumbled softly as he faced the cellphone screen.
His consternation was not caused by the ramblings of his friend floating in the air, for he was used to them.
The real cause of it was his classmate, seated beside him, her face pouting as she fiddled with her cellphone–Honoka Shikibu.
Honoka’s stare was facing the front, her expression rigid as her fingers were tapping at the cellphone below the table fluidly. As a result, Koremitsu’s phone was vibrating.

(That’s the 5th one already!)
Lethargic, he opened the message.

“You weren’t around during break time. Did you look for Her Highness Aoi (*`□ω□´)?”

There was also a JIS emoticon inside.
The message before that was,
“Where did you go during the break?”
And before that,
“You weren’t around during the break.”
And even before that,
“Your face is as red as a monkey’s.”
And before that one
“What’s the matter?…Though I don’t really care.”
It was quite a long runaround, and though she was being overly aloof, this was the first time she mentioned Aoi by name, causing Koremitsu to be quietly shocked.
(Is there a need to specifically ask such a question in class!?)
Koremitsu curled his lips, and never replied. In response, Honoka frowned, twiddled her fingers, and Koremitsu’s cellphone vibrated again.
“!!!”
He opened the mail,

“What did you do with Her Highness Aoi!?□(●`□´●)□”

Well, that was a fastball.
“Wow! Miss Shikibu is flaring her temper! She certainly is worried about Miss Aoi; she was looking gloomy during break time.”
Hikaru peeked at the cellphone from above, and commented,
(Damn it! Don’t look!)
Koremitsu heard that effeminate pretty face chime in enthusiastically, covering the screen with his hand as he typed.
“Nothing much.”

And after this reply,
“But Her Highness Aoi just confessed to you this morning, no?”
Honoka was seated beside him, gritted her teeth and frowning.

(What confession–that’s not it…she did say that she wants me to be her boyfriend…but what she meant this…)

Koremitsu’s mind was trying to come up with excuse as he sweated profusely.Honoka’s cheeks were blushing slightly as she stared at the blackboard frenziedly.
After seeing her expression, Koremitsu felt his throat shrink, and he had difficulty breathing as his face was completely tense.
(Damn it, this is troublesome!)
He continued to tap at the cellphone keys.
“That’s not a confession.”
“Then what is it(□□`ω´ □□)?”
“She just had something on, and asked me to accompany her.”
“A date.”
“That’s not it!”
“Don’t lie! It’s a date!”
“I said it’s not!”
Hikaru could not bear to watch this any further, and said with diffidence.
“I say, Koremitsu, do not scowl that much and write some nice calming words for Miss Shikibu, will you not? For example, the floral language of Asian Hazel is reconciliation’, the lavender is ‘a mutual understanding heart’, and the Carnation is ‘I believe in your love’. Either of these will be good. Be like a gentleman and gently write some floral words to her.”
(You’re noisy! Shut up, you flower-maniac of a ghost!)
Koremitsu grumbled in his heart, and replied back, **“I said that’s not it!”**
In the end, both of these were going about with such meaningless exchanges, and Koremitsu got a last message,
“What? To think I was worried about you!
I don’t care about you now! Don’t ever send me a mail again! o(□□;)O!”
“I should be the one saying that!”

And so, this exchange between them ended.
Once it was break time, Koremitsu clicked his tongue and got up from his seat, while Honoka turned aside angrily.

◊ ◊ ◊

“Goodness! Women are all like that! Why in the world must I be questioned by her?”

Koremitsu grumbled on the corridor.

He was originally deemed as a leader of gangsters because of his red hair and savage looks, and was ostracized as a result. At this point, his veins were bulging, his back was arched, and his walking posture was akin to a wheezing wild dog; all the ordinary students would hurriedly make a way for him.
Beside him, Hikaru chimed gently,
“But you are being very unfair to Miss Shikibu when you say such things. It was rare enough that both of you agreed to go to the pool, and right when the atmosphere was ripe, Miss Aoi came up and said, “Please be my boyfriend.” How can Miss Shikibu remain unmoved after hearing those words?”
Koremitsu was speechless.
It was true…that the mood between him and Honoka was a little better…before Aoi said those impactful words.
At that time, Honoka did not show him that fierce glare, and neither did she pout.
“Let’s go to the pool”
Her face was completely beetroot when she said that.
Koremitsu was so flustered he was at a loss of what to do, but he did answer her *“Yeah”* with a achingly sweet feeling.
And then, Aoi ran over to him with a pale look on her face, making a shocking request…no, she had her issues.
That reason was troubling Koremitsu.
“Ah…yo…what about that?”

Koremitsu was frozen all over, completely tense as he glanced at Hikaru.
And Hikaru spoke with a matured look,
“It is a wonderful thing to have a pretty, kind, honest girl with such beautiful legs like Miss Shikibu to be jealous about you. You should not ignore her.”
The light shone in through the corridor windows, dyeing Hikaru’s white tender face. His light brown hair was dazzling golden, and there was no signs of gloom on his gentle sidelong face. His tone and expression looked really gentle…
“**Y-You**…you’re rather calm unlike Shikibu.”
Koremitsu murmured, ostensibly testing the latter.
After what happened in the morning, Koremitsu was thoroughly vexed by Honoka’s unhappiness, and was uneasy about Hikaru’s reaction.
Why was it that he could look so aloof?
“Is there anything you want to say to me?”
“Hm?”
Hikaru tilted his head.
Koremitsu was left breathless and growled,
“…I’m talking about Aoi! You don’t care!?”
(Damn it! This guy’s definitely playing dumb!)
He inadvertently suspected.

–Mr Akagi, please be my boyfriend!

At the instance Hikaru’s ex-fiancee Aoi said this with a pleading look, Koremitsu was at a loss of what to do.
“It’s a little inconvenient for me now…we’ll talk later!”
He was already exerting all his strength trying to raise his voice.
Honoka looked stupefied as she watched from the sidelines, and Koremitsu was flustered, sweat trickling all over him.
During break time, Koremitsu went to the Arts room to hear the details from Aoi.
Aoi had her knees closed together as she sat on the chair, fidgeting about probably out of frustration or embarrassment.
“When I was looking for Shiiko, I asked Father and the elders in my family about the engagement between my friend and Mr Kuze’s son…perhaps because of

this…Father and the rest mistook that I was interested, and started talking to me about engagement…”
Aoi lowered her head, her petite body shrinking further.
“Hikaru just passed away recently, and I really do not wish to look for a new partner immediately, but Father and the rest said that it is better to make a decision sooner so that I can soon forget about Hikaru…so I carelessly told me…”
She swayed her legs about, blushing, and after a while, lowered her head and spoke in a teeny-weeny voice,
“…I said that I had a boyfriend.”
“Heh?”
“I told them that a certain friend of Hikaru often came by to comfort me after Hikaru had passed away, that the person is really nice and often talks to me about Hikaru, so we naturally had feelings for each other…I-I am sorry!”
“H-Hey!”
Aoi was complete ambashed, her head and neck completely red.
“I could not think of any other man, so I could only talk about you, Mr Akagi. But Father and the others said that they want to meet you. I said that you will be troubled if Asa were to know about this, so we could only date each other secretly. I tried giving all sorts of excuses, like we met in school, and never talked to each other in front of others, but they would not listen…and even said that they would help me hide this from Asa, that I have you bring you along and introduce you to them.”
Aoi’s smooth flowing black hair was swaying weakly.
After seeing Aoi being so tentative, even Koremitsu felt sorry for her.
But the situation itself was already ridiculous.
How could Aoi, a refined princess, go out with a wild hound like him?
Furthermore, Aoi was a girl Hikaru really treasured.
It was too despicable of him to have an affair with a friend’s woman, especially when this friend was always beside him.
(But Aoi’s forced to be betrothed because she helped me to look for Shiiko.)
Koremitsu could understand how Aoi felt. She always loved Hikaru since young, and naturally, could not get engaged with anyone else immediately.

Koremitsu fell in love with a girl for the first time, Yū, and had to separate from her; at this point, he still could not bring himself to date another girl.
And so,
“Just once, please? During the garden party this week, d-do you mind acting as my boyfriend? It is a garden party, just a simply party where people just stand around eating. You just have to be with me and eat whatever you want. Please!”
Aoi pleaded him with a teary look,
“Alright.”
Koremitsu had no choice but to agree.
Hikaru did not object, and did not look surprised at all as he merely watched over them with a reluctant silent expression.

“Why didn’t you say anything back then? I know I don’t have much love experience, but I think anyone in such a situation won’t be very happy. I mean, who’ll be willing to see their fiancee elope with another man? Even if there’s a suitable reason, even if it’s temporary, you’ll find it unforgivable. You’ll want to curse or kill that guy, right?”

Koremitsu glared at Hikaru while they were in a corner of the empty corridor, expressing his inner frustrations.
“It is fine. Miss Aoi is pretty troubled at the moment, and I do feel that you are most suited to be her boyfriend.”
Hikaru spoke heartily.
His handsome face showed a pure smile.
(Isn’t this guy going to thrash about furiously or something?)
It certainly was foolish of Koremitsu to feel guilty for agreeing to act as Aoi’s boyfriend. Though he did not want to be hated by Hikaru, he was furious at the sloppy attitude shown by the latter.
As Koremitsu continued to grumble with a frown, Hikaru showed a clear Saint-like expression, answering,
“I do not wish for Miss Aoi to remain single because of me. I do earnestly wish that she will one day be with her true beloved. That man however has to be more handsome than me, has a nicer voice than me, has better eloquence, is

more familiar with female interests, understands more about floral languages, and is more refined at kissing techniques than me, and will show more effort in protecting Miss Aoi than me."
"YOU'RE NOT ALLOWING ANYONE TO WOO HER AT ALL! THERE'S NO SUCH PERSON ANYWAY!!"
Koremitsu retorted.
It was likely that only one out of a thousand men would be well versed in floral language.
Hikaru then showed a dazzling smile,
"Love is a free thing after all, so I do not mind at all. However, it is advised that you do not remain too close to Miss Aoi, for she will be extremely tense."
Hikaru advised(?).
...Looks like he's somewhat worried.
Koremitsu heaved a sigh.
(I really don't know what this guy's thinking. I don't know whether he's simple minded or an enigma. He looks jovial at times, and yet unexpected gloomy at times...well, he became a ghost at such a young age, and he has all sorts of troubles, so I guess he's having it tough.)
Koremitsu pondered silently as he compared his plight with the ghost and himself, the one being afflicted.
"Also, Miss Shikibu will definitely get jealous if you and Miss Aoi have an improved relationship."
"Ack–that has nothing to do with this, right?"
Hikaru gave a cryptic chuckle,
"it is better for you to be with Miss Shikibu. It certainly s rare to have such a nice girl; though she may act aloof in front of you, and is trying to act haughty, but you can make her laugh here and there."
"Y-You idiot, what're you saying!? I don't care! She's the one who likes to get angry! Why must I take the initiative to get along with her?"
"Both you and Miss Shikibu really are stubborn."
"Don't smile like you've seen through everything! It's annoying!"
"Yes yes. Let us go see some flowers and calm down for a while. The Chinese Trumpet Vine in the courtyard is about to bloom, and the Oleanders are pretty the way their thin, thread-like petals. They do resemble the peach blossoms, but

have poison in them; this is where their charm lies. Oh, the Hibiscus is able to bloom soon."
"I don't have the time to look at flowers."
"Please, just a little while?"
Hikaru, who loved flowers so much, was pleading, "Tch, you leave me with no choice." and Koremitsu grimaced as he went off to the courtyard.
"Just watch for a while. If you want to keep looking at them, we'll come back after school."
"Oh, thanks."
Hikaru beamed, ostensibly chuffed that he could watch the flowers.
Koremitsu was often forced to accompany Hikaru in viewing the flowers after he was haunted by the latter. He was amazed at how Hikaru could watch them without getting tired of them.
Hikaru said that every single flower had a different appearance, but the utterly crude Koremitsu was not delicate enough to comprehend that, *aren't they all just flowers?* merely wondering this,
They arrived at the hallway; the scenery of the courtyard clearly shown before him.
This was the place Koremitsu first met Hikaru.
When he was anxiously looking for the staff room, he found an effeminate pretty student leaning by the pillar.
That boy was so pretty Koremitsu assumed he was a girl, and he was the only one not afraid of Koremitsu, who was shunned by everyone out of fear, even showing an earnest smile…

–Then, I'll come over to your class to borrow your textbook then, Mr. Akagi. There's something I want to ask of you, too.

The sweet voice he heard back then suddenly awoke in this soothing summer wind, and Koremitsu had the feeling that an effeminate boy with a crystal look was standing behind a pillar.
What flowers were blooming there back then?
He could not recall.

Currently, there were trumpet shaped Orange Chinese Trumpet Bells, thin red Oleanders swaying slightly in the wind, dangling from the racks; in the middle, the white Hibiscus with red tints on them were fighting for space, blooming.
“The floral language for Chinese Trumpet Bells has many meanings, including colorful life, overflowing love, femininity…there are lots of them.”
Hikaru spoke cheerfully.
“Eh?”
He suddenly blurted in surprise.
“…There are a lot of fallen flowers.”
Koremitsu, upon hearing this from Hikaru, noticed that there were lots of flowers scattered around the racks and trees, petals everywhere…
“Is it because the wind’s too big?”
“If that were the case, the flowers at the top will fall as well…”
Hikaru stared at the crown of the flower racks, looking confused.
Suddenly, a strong gust blew.
Koremitsu raised his hand to protect his eyes.
The air, filled with intense light and sweltering air, ruffled Koremitsu’s red hair.
As he widened his eyes…
He found his vision being dyed red.
He thought they were petals.
But it was red flowing hair, volant like petals.
A student walked out from behind a pillar, just as Hikaru did back then.
That person was dressed in a skirt, surely she was a woman.
Looking at the voluptuous breasts, slender waist, rounded figure, it was certain she was a female.
Her glistening, flowing red hair was draped gently upon her large humps, the curled ends of her hair swaying sublimely at her waist.
The noble, graceful face of hers was no inferior to her hair, as her long eyelashes were curled opulently, the plump lips showing a smile of decisiveness.
The surroundings were ostensibly brightened the instant she appeared, fascinating red flowers seemingly filling them.
Hikaru’s catchphrase was ‘girls are like flowers’, and this student here was undoubtedly the crown of them all.

(When did this woman appear? Why’s she smiling at me?)

Like Hikaru, she looked at Koremitsu fearlessly, her stare was earnest yet purposeful.

“Are you Koremitsu Akagi?”

Koremitsu’s heart immediately raced the instant the other person called his name with such a cheerful, impressionable voice.

“How do you know my name?’

The girl narrowed her eyes, and smiled, answering,

“You are famous after all.”

This conversation was similar to the one he had with Hikaru the first time they met.

And back then, Hikaru suddenly mentioned that he wanted to borrow the Classics textbook–

The girl slowly approached him, her red hair swaying gently as her long slender limbs were dancing elegantly.

“Here, this is for you.”

She suddenly handed him a textbook,

The Classics textbook!

“Wha…?”

“Lending this to you.”

While Koremitsu was left speechless, she opened her plump red lips, and showed a mature smile, saying,

“Please return it to me at the Japanese Dance Clubroom after school. I shall be waiting there.”

“Huh? The Japanese Dance–hey!”

The girl had already turned away, walking with light steps. Koremitsu hurriedly called for her, and she turned around with a smile on her face, saying to him with a cute cheeky expression.
“I have a request to make later.”
“!”

His breath was stuck in his throat.
–There’s something I want to ask of you.
The red hair swayed as it departed.

Koremitsu watched on with a nonplussed look.

“Koremitsu, the bell just rang. If you do not return to the classroom,”

Hikaru’s voice cajoled Koremitsu to his senses.

“Hey! Hikaru! Who’s that woman? Someone you know?”

Certainly, her quotes could not have been strikingly similar to Hikaru’s if that was not the case.

As Koremitsu asked while running back to the classroom, Hikaru loosened his lips.

“Hm, I was surprised that she would appear so suddenly. It is rare that you would be so mesmerized by a girl, Koremitsu You even spaced out there.”

“I-I wasn’t!”

I just didn't hear the bell, that's all…!

Upon seeing Koremitsu pout unhappily, Hikaru looked ecstatic.

"You do not have to hide it. No man is able to withstand Tsuyako's charms."

"Tsuyako? That woman? You know her after all!"

Koremitsu panted as he raced down the corridor, while Hikaru spoke to him with a refreshing voice.

"Yes. She is Tsuyako Udate–the grandest, elegant of them all in the garden, the red weeping cherry blossom."

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Koremitsu arrived at the classroom right before the teacher arrived, and was huffing as he sat at his seat.

He stared at the Classics Textbook in his hand, and found that it was for the second year.

(So she's older than me by a year? She's my senior? But I can't use this Second Year's textbook even if I borrow it.)

What was she trying to do?

At this instance, Koremitsu suddenly sensed a stare, turned around, and found Honoka watching him with her cheeks puffed.

(She's still angry?)

Koremitsu in turn glared back defiantly.

And Honoka pouted her lips as she turned away.

(~Argh!!! Women are that troublesome after all!!)

This standoff between him and Honoka lasted till classes ended.

And so–
“Hey, what does that woman want from me?”

“Who knows? I do not have a clue either. Perhaps she just wanted to talk to you.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Koremitsu whispered to Hikaru with a scowl on his face as he proceeded down the corridor on the 4th level.

“While you were hospitalized, I often talked with Tsuyako regarding you. I always lamented, yearning that you would arrive at school sooner, and once that happened, I could be friends with you and exchange textbooks “

The instance Hikaru mentioned about it using his sweet fragrant voice, Koremitsu felt his face sizzle a little.

And so, Koremitsu gingerly tried to change the topic,

“A-nyway, the Japanese dance you talk of, it involves dancing in kimonos, right?”

“Yes. The school style Tsuyako belongs to is the ‘Your Shadow’, one of the newest trend of styles often seen on television. She attained the right to inherit the style name at the age of 15.”

“Is that amazing?”

“It really is. Though there are those who achieved such a privilege at a younger age, Tsuyako’s dance is really special. The way she dances is elegant, like the red flowers falling from the sky.”

Hikaru eyes were dazzling as he boasted, ostensibly bragging about himself. However, Koremitsu did not really understand, for he was unfamiliar with the arts, and hardly watched television.

He soon arrived at the classroom with the ‘Japanese Dance Club’ signboard on it.

He knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

A clear impressionable voice could be heard.

Koremitsu opened the door.

The inside was wider than he expected, large enough to lay out 8 tatamis.

However…

“Woah!”

He was taken aback to see her dressed in a white Juban, draped in a refreshing light blue color kimono.

The tender white name and the thin undergarment revealed the alluring lumps of voluptuous breasts.

“I am currently changing clothes now. I am currently the only member of this club, so you do not have to worry.”

Koremitsu was blushing in embarrassment, trying his best to avert his eyes. Tsuyako remained unabashed however as she combed her hair in a refined manner.

She tied her glamorous looking light red *Obi* and gently moved her hair to the side, tying it. During that time, Koremitsu remained in a corner of the room, facing the wall as he stood still, clenching his fists.

Looking rather amused, Tsuyako let out a chuckle.

“You cannot see it when I have my Juban on, so you do not have to worry about that, Mr Akagi. You certainly are gentlemanly unlike your appearance.”

(You mean that I look like some perverted rapist or something?)

As Koremitsu frowned, Tsuyako said,

“Please, have a seat.”

She knelt upon the tatami, her white tender hands placed elegantly on her knees.

Her actions were regal, gentle, feminine. Perhaps this was due to her dance training?

Koremitsu remained wary of her, but even he too was mesmerized.

Tsuyako was seated in a Seiza position, and Koremitsu was apprehensive about sitting with his legs folded. With his back slouched, he knelt upon the tatami gingerly, took out the Classics Textbook from his school bag, laid it out on the tatami, and handed it over.

“Here…I’m returning this.”

“Oh? Thank you.”

Tsuyako brought the textbook to her chest, smiling innocently like a child who had succeeded in pranking.

This mature beauty suddenly looked so cute, and Koremitsu’s heart raced at that instance.

(What am I doing, idiot! She’s just being polite with me! What’s there to be panicky about? Hikaru’s going to laugh at me again!)

At this point, Hikaru would certainly be watching Koremitsu’s reaction from sidelong, smiling away.

With Tsuyako watching him with such intent, even Koremitsu, who never had interest in women, was itching all over.

It was not a feeling of anxiety he felt when he was at Yū’s house; it was one more aggressive, causing his face and body to sizzle.
–the grandest, elegant of them all in the garden, the red weeping cherry blossom.
Koremitsu assumed that all the flowers were the same, but this flower was certainly different from the rest.

To hide his nervousness, he scowled, trying to alive aloof as he asked,

“…What do you want from me?”

Tsuyako smiled,and answered,

“I will like to have you as my boyfriend.”

“What!?”

Koremitsu’s back straightened while he was taken aback by this reply, nearly falling backwards.

She wants me to be her boyfriend?

“Oh, so that is how it is.”

Hikaru murmured to himself.

(What’s with that response? How in the world are you able to remain this calm?”

“Aren’t you Hi-Hikaru’s girlfriend or something?”

“Yes, I am one of Hikaru’s many flowers. I would say however that rather than a girlfriend, we are accomplices, or you may call me his mistress.”

Tsuyako sat still as she answered with a smile.

Cold sweat appeared upon Koremitsu’s skin.

(Why’s a High School Student talking about things like ‘Mistress here’!?)

“An-Anyway, you dated hikaru before, right? How can you date Hikaru’s friend afterwards? He’ll be sad if that happens.”

“I do not really mind as long as Tsuyako is happy.”

(SHUT UP!!)

“Hikaru will support me no matter who I date. I have always been like this; love is free after all.”

“You stop spouting nonsense too!”

“I am beautiful after all, and I do release pheromones that attract the opposite gender.”

“So what about that!?”

She actually boasted that she was beautiful. Well, she certainly was beautiful, and certainly, she does give off lots of pheromones.

“I became single from the moment Hikaru passe away, so there are others clinging onto me every day, which is an annoying thing. It is dangerous and troublesome for women to be too attractive; if I have someone like you with that savage delinquent-like expression…no, feisty looking man, it will be much easier for me to repel the pests.”

“That’s what you’re really amazing for!?”

Certainly, that man would not be called a boyfriend, but a guard dog…no, a pesticide.

“Well, with Koremitsu standing guard nearby, it is most likely that no male students will approach her.”

(Why’re you agreeing wholeheartedly like that !!?)

“I was joking about having you as my boyfriend.”

“And you just admitted to that so callously!? Why’re you making such jokes!?”

“Sorry about that. Your reactions were too amusing, so I could not help but want to tease you a little.”

Tsuyako giggled.

“I understand how she feels.”

Hikaru nodded.

(I told you not to butt in!)

Koremitsu was utterly livid, his head broiling. Unwilling to care about Tsuyako any further, he stood up.

“You done with your words? I’m going then.”

“Please wait.”

Tsuyako’s tone seemed anxious for some reason.

“I really am troubled.”

She lifted her head at Koremitsu, still seated in the Seiza position, her once lively expression now ostensibly hazy, looking extremely fragile.

Koremitsu stopped in his tracks, sounding serious,

“What happened?”

“Tsuyako?”

Hikaru too looked uptight

Tsuyako cuddled her slender shoulders tightly as she lowered her head, her loosened hair dangling on her pale face, her red lips quivering.

“I really…do not know what to do…I am scared, worried..I cannot sleep at night…”

“Hey…”

Koremitsu knelt on the tatami, and nervously leaned forward.

“If this keeps up, I might end up destroying the flowers Hikaru treasures.”

“Flowers?”

“Mr Akagi…can you help me…? Can you please keep watch on me so that I do not destroy them?”

“Okay, I guess.”

Koremitsu nodded seriously.

Tsuyako, without lifting her head, handed a slip of paper right towards Koremitsu.

“Please sign on this club entrance form then.”

Chapter 2

“Welcome back, big brother!”

The instant Koremitsu opened the door and said ‘I’m back’, he heard footsteps, and was greeted by a black-haired twintail girl and a smart-looking white cat.

One of them was Shioriko, who joined the Akagis just recently, and Lapis, who joined them before the former did.

Lapis’ original owner, Yū, had once said that its hearing ability was not really good, but it suddenly snuck out from somewhere whenever Koremitsu returned home; perhaps it sensed the tremors in the air. It however would merely appear, and never tried to cling itself upon others, which Shioriko would do instead.

“Welcome back, welcome back, welcome back.”

“Hey, once is already enough, Shiiko.”

Koremitsu was unable to move forward, and tried to pull her away, but she climbed upon him.

“I’ve been waiting for you for a long time~actually, tonight’s dinner is made by aunt Koharu and me, you know~ there’s the super spicy chicken in spicy sauce, mapo tofu and pickles. I heard you like spicy things, so I added lots of chilli inside, big brother!”

Shioriko lifted her head at Koremitsu, speaking with a cheeky smile.

Not too long ago,

“You stupid dog”

She had been calling him this, a stark contrast at this point.

Till now, Koremitsu was still confused, but Shioriko had completely adapted herself to the Akagis and his family members.

“Well, I’m happy with that, but it’s meaningless if you can’t eat it, Shiiko. If you make it too spicy, you’ll be sobbing and snivelling like the last time when we had curry.”

A few days ago, “I want to eat the curry adults eat!” Shioriko whined about wanting to eat the same curry Koremitsu and the rest ate, creating quite the commotion in the end. Once Koremitsu pointed this out, her face reddened, and she started slamming at his chest.

“I-I wasn’t snivelling. I wasn’t prepared, that’s all. I tried it out when I added, so I’m fine here. Don’t treat me as a kid, idiot!”

She turned her face away angrily.

“Anyway, it’s really delicious. Hurry and take a shower! Start eating after that!”

Once she said that, she trotted back into the kitchen.

And Lapis’ indigo eyes were staring at their interaction coldly.

“It looks like Shiiko is a lot livelier than before.”

Hikaru too spoke in his usual calm, gentle voice.

“Yeah. Too lively, if you ask me.”

“It sure is tough being the big brother.”

“Stop teasing me!”

“But I suppose she is this lively because you are with her.”

“Yo-You idiot! Don’t make it sound so cheesy!”

“You really are not used to receiving praise, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru giggled, and Koremitsu remained silent as he stormed to the bathroom with a scowl.

“So?”

He removed his shirt in the changing room, threw it into the washing machine, and asked coldly,

“Your next ‘unfinished business’ is regarding Tsuyako, right?”

Koremitsu’s scowling face was the only thing reflected on the mirror at the basin.

“Yeah.”

A serious sounding voice could be heard from behind.

Koremitsu recalled the conversation he had with Tsuyako in the clubroom.

–I hope that you will join the Japanese Dance Club. This is what I am asking of you

Tsuyako said.

She showed a teasing expression, and her shivering body, pale expression seemed to be an act.

–Though we call it a club, it is a problem that I am the only member. I will have to forfeit this room if I do not get more members. I have been trying my best to fight back, but the student council president, Miss Asai does seem to hate me.

–If you become a member, it will have the effect of shooing away other men. I did mention before that there has been a stalker recently. It is a bother, to be honest.

–I can only ask you for this. Please help me by joining the Japanese Dance Club. I will get mentally stressed out worrying over the lack of a clubroom and the stalker, and might end up doing something. I just plucked off many flowers in the courtyard today, those flowers Hikaru really treasured…

Hikaru did mutter before that the flowers were wilting strangely. That, of course, was not because he was worrying too much.

Tsuyako’s voice and expression remained chirpy, ostensibly joking.

But once she mentioned about the plucking of the flowers, Hikaru, who had been listening from beside, looked gloomy, and requested Koremitsu seriously.

Do you mind joining for the time being, Koremitsu?

And Koremitsu could only answer,

“If it’s for the time being..”

“Tsuyako has always been able to deal with her admirers well; she established the Japanese Dance Club once she entered the High School affiliate, and managed to handle everything perfectly. She is not the type to rely on others.”

Koremitsu soaked himself within the bathtub, and Hikaru above him was surrounded in white steam as he uttered silently.

“Tsuyako Udate is a proud, elegant lady standing tall like the red weeping cherry blossoms swaying under the hazy moon.”

He sounded serious, proud, his eyes filled with tenderness.

“The dim, blurry moon in the night of Spring is called the Hazy Moon. It will not shine brightly, but its light does not create any shadows. That dim light is like a fleeting fantasy, a Moon of unparalleled beauty...

The Heian musician Chisato Ohno once marvelled at it, saying that there is none that surpasses the sight of the hazy moon night in the midst of Spring, and I must say it is aptly put. Try imagining it, Koremitsu, how alluring the red weeping cherry blossoms are as they dangle in the dim moonlight.

As the thin red petals absorb the moonlight, they shall give off a faint light, the stalks swaying about, seemingly bragging about its beauty, boasting that it is the queen of the garden. The trunk is firmly entrenched into the ground, unfaltering, yet its branches are curved in such a demure manner, maintaining its regal presence…that is the kind of flower Tsuyako is."

Hikaru's face was gradually becoming resplendent, his eyes tipsy in ecstasy, proud as if he was talking about himself, grinning from ear to ear..

His gleeful expression however gave way to melancholy, and he stared at Koremitsu, saying,

"I suppose it is weird for Tsuyako to ask you to join the club at this time. Even if Asa wanted to take that room back, she would definitely not do that. There has to be a catch or something."

Hikaru's austere expression was to a point of somberness, a far cry from the weak looking youth who would only talk about flowers.

(This guy must have been worried sick about those girls every day when he was alive…sure must be tiring…)

But Koremitsu had clearly witnessed the affections Hikaru had given to all the girls; he always treasured his promises with them and would do anything to live up to his bargain, whether it was to Aoi, Yū or Shioriko.

Thus, he surely must have been worried for that elegant, beaming upperclassman.

“Guess I got no choice.”

Koremitsu grumbled amidst the steam.

“I don’t have club activity to join to begin with. I got lots of time after school.”

Hikaru’s face lit up immediately,

“Thank you Koremitsu! I am relieved now that you are going to be with Tsuyako!”

Koremitsu felt embarrassed, his back itching as he stared at the stare filled with trust.

“But there’s also the matter about Aoi. My mind’s in a mess now that I have to handle two women at the same time, damn it.”

Could he possibly do it when he was not used to handling women? And if Honoka were to know about it, she would likely lambast him for being a cheating man.

And so, Hikaru gave an elegant smile,

“It is fine. During these past two months, your skills relating to girls must have improved quite a lot. You have this harem prince in me giving direct lessons to you after all.”

“Don’t brag about yourself like that! Aren’t you just spewing knowledge about flowers!?”

Koremitsu stood up from the bathtub, retorting at Hikaru’s words, only for the bathroom door to suddenly open.

“Seriously, big brother, how long do you want to bath? Dinner’s done a long time ago!”

An impatient Shioriko was puffing her cheeks as she said this.

“Woah! Don’t just come in like this!”

Koremitsu hastily retreated into the bathtub.

“Humph, I’ve already seen you naked before. I still have that embarrassing photo of you in my cellphone.”

“WHA!? You still haven’t deleted that photo you took during our first encounter!? Hey, Shiiko! Hand me the cellphone and the memory card!”

“Don’t wanna. Stop yapping and hurry up, or I’m going to show it to Lapis.”

It would not be a problem if she showed it to Lapis. The problem however was that a fourth grader girl had such a photo in her cellphone.

“Wait, Shiiko! Damn it! Women are all like that! Even brats!”

Koremitsu hurried out of the bathtub, wrapped a towel around his waist, and chased after Shioriko, only to be caught by Koharu.

“Koremitsu! Don’t run around the house in such a shameful getup! We have a girl in our house!”

She even smacked him with rolled newspaper.

Why am I the one being hit…!?
Koremitsu angrily gritted his teeth, and Hikaru could only grimace elegantly as he watched from above.

“Hm…looks like your skills of dealing with girls can use some more work.”

♢ ♢ ♢

On the next day, after school,

“Argh, I’m late because of cleaning duty!”

Koremitsu sprinted down the corridor as he held his bag over his shoulder.

“That is because everyone who was supposed to work with you were scared of you, and ran off. You did finish up the work obediently however.”

“What else am I supposed to do? I’m alone.”

Koremitsu retorted unhappily, and right when he was about to open the door with the signboard ‘Japanese Dance Club’, he stopped.

(It’ll be bad if she’s changing clothes like the previous day, right?)

He first knocked on the door.

But there was no reply.

“Hey, I’m going in.”

Koremitsu yelled, pulled the door apprehensively, and found Tsuyako inside, dressed in kimono. It was pink, littered with red flowers all over, the collar and sash red in collar.

Her clothing was as radiant as it was the previous day, but the hair tied near her neck was a little ruffled; her eyes were red, and there were tear marks down her cheeks.

(Was she crying?)

Koremitsu was utterly terrified of seeing women cry.

His heart suddenly raced.

(Is it because I’m late? Did the stalker appear? Was that real?)

Hikaru too was frowning worriedly.

Just when Koremitsu was wondering how he should talk to her, Tsuyako showed a completely different expression as she smiled cheerfully.

That vibrant smile was like a field of red cherry blossoms blooming in unison, the petals fluttering in the wind.

“Good. You have arrived.”

She spoke cheerfully, seemingly delighted from within.

Koremitsu started to feel anxious again.

She had reverted back to her old self the previous day, and she held his hand while he was feeling flustered, pulled him inside, and spoke in a tone befitting an older sister,

“Let us begin then.”

“Eh?”

“Mr Akagi, your back is arched again, your neck, not just your upper body, has to remain straightened. The soles are to rest against each other. No, you cannot lift your ankles that high. Your arms have to be about two fists away from the body. Turn your head around…not the face, just the head. Move it slowly and carefully. Okay, let us repeat this again.”

Tsuyako’s cheerful voice and Koremitsu’s gasping were the only things heard in the clubroom covered with tatamis.

“Again!? Haven’t I been doing this same thing for an hour already!?”

“The fundamentals are the most important things, even in sports and studies.”

Tsuyako insisted.

Koremitsu agreed to join the club for the time being, but he never expected himself to have to learn the proper seating postures, basic greeting manners, and basic standing posture.

From time to time, Tsuyako would hold Koremitsu’s arms, touch his neck, and guide him along with clarity in her voice;

“Your shoulder’s dropping again.”

“Stretch your arm out.”

Sometimes, she would even hit him on the shoulders or arms with a fan, and correct him sternly.

Koremitsu had always assumed that a Japanese dance was a slow, feeble kind of dance, but he was already gasping for breath before he even got to the dancing

itself, sweating profusely.

In contrast, Tsuyako’s had yet to mess up the hem of her kimono as she touched Koremitsu on the shoulders and elbows elegantly, demonstrating to him.

“Like this.”

The red hair, tied together in a knot, swayed gently along with her hems; even the movement of the arms themselves was etched in Koremitsu’s eyes like a painting.

(Amazing)

He marveled in his heart over and over again, mesmerized as he watched on.

Whenever Tsuyako approached him however, there would be a sweet fragrance that nauseated him. He froze over, causing Tsuyako to be amused as she teased,

“Your neck has to bend.”

She even reached her hand out at Koremitsu’s face.

(Damn it, am I being teased now?)

He gritted his teeth, moving his body gingerly while Hikaru gleefully floated at the ceiling watching over them.

“If Miss Shikibu is to notice you being so cute now, she will surely be envious of Tsuyako.”

(What has this got to do with Shikibu!?)

Koremitsu recalled that Shikibu had been frowning and glancing at him from her seat, located beside his, for the entire day, and could only curl his lips.

He was miffed at the rapid-fire messages sent to him the previous day, but he also found it annoying to be stared at for the the entire day, which vexed him to no end.

(Stop giggling already, you stupid ghost!)

Koremitsu glared at the ceiling, only for Tsuyako to correct the position of his neck.

“No, Mr Akagi, it has to be the gold look, not moon look.”

“Gold look? What’s that?”

“It is the positioning of the stare when dancing. The moon look is to look high, the bell look is to roll your eyes back, the silver look is to look down, and the bronze look is to look right at your feet. The gold look is the basic of basics, to look at the front.”

Tsuyako held Koremitsu by the cheeks with her hands. They felt silky and warm, very comforting.

Koremitsu’s face was adjusted, and he found Tsuyako’s beautiful face right in front of him, causing his heart to race.

Tsuyako gently narrowed her eyes that were laced with long eyelashes.

“Right, this is the gold look.”

Koremitsu’s face was sizzling, his resistances nearly failing completely.

“Stop touching me, Tsuyako.”

“Senpai.”

Tsuyako pinched Koremitsu on the nose.

“The only one younger than me who can call me by my name is my lover. You are not my lover now, so you have to call me senpai.”

“…Tsuyako…se-senpai!”

Koremitsu murmured, and Tsuyako was grinning away.

“Again.”

“Se-Senpai.”

Koremitsu raised his voice slightly.

He had never taken part in any club activity, and never had any upperclassmen he was close with.

It was really embarrassing for him to call her senpai, and his face was broiling.

The grin on Tsuyako’s face became more pronounced, and she closed her eyes, saying,

“Again.”

“SENPAI!”

Koremitsu yelled in distress,

“Aga–“

“THAT’S ENOUGH ALREADY!”

Upon hearing Koremitsu holler, Tsuyako opened her eyes, and giggled amusedly, seemingly pleased.

“Hm, you pass. I never thought that it would be so comforting to hear such a savage person call me with a honorific. I guess I might even get addicted to it; continue calling me ‘senpai’, okay?”

“Ugh.”

It was impossible for him to call her that, given that she was being so expectant.

Hikaru tried to resist the urge to laugh as he teased,

“How about you call me senpai too? Do you rather I call you senpai? Koremitsu senpai?”

(Shut up, you idiot!)

“You are giving that moon look again. Why are you so concerned about the ceiling?”

“It-It’s nothing. There just happened to be a fly down there…”

Koremitsu murmured awkwardly, averting his stare from Hikaru.

“Your concentration is faltering? How about we have a break.”

“Ah sure.”

“Hold on a moment, I shall prepare some iced green tea.”

Koremitsu knelt on the tatami, like a dog ordered by its owner to wait.

She boiled some water using the electric kettle, took out some ice from the cooler box, quickly prepared some iced green tea, and poured it into a glass jug. She also took out some thinly sliced chestnut-steamed
Yōkan
.

The cooled green tea gave off a refreshing aroma that moistened his parched throat. The chestnut-steamed

Yōkan
 was not too sweet, and even Koremitsu, who abhorred sweet food, found it delicious.

Hikaru continued to float leisurely in the air, and Tsuyako consumed her tea elegantly in front of Koremitsu.

“Oh yes, how did you and Hikaru become friends? Did Hikaru borrow a textbook from you, Mr Akagi?”

Tsuyako asked, clearly looking very interested.

“No, well, he asked if he could borrow the Classics textbook from me, but there was no Classics lesson that day.”

“Eh? Why did he not investigate things thoroughly? Since he was really hoping to be your friend, he should have investigated it thoroughly. I think he was so excited about meeting you after such a long time that he forgot about it.”

Both Koremitsu and Hikaru blushed.

“And then, what did Hikaru do?”

“He said that he had something he wanted to ask of me, and that he wanted to come to my classroom, but he never did. He had been harassing me for the

entire day, even when I’m using the toilet. I just can’t chase him away.”

“Koremitsu, that may be the truth, but the way you are talking about it indicates that I am a stalker or something.”

“No way, he actually followed you to the toilet?”

Tsuyako chuckled, and giggled away, seemingly amused by it.

“I guess I lost to his persistence.”

The instant he said this, Tsuyako giggled again, saying,

“Hikaru really liked you, huh? Maybe it is because of your hair.”

She gradually reached her arm out to him, twiddling with his bangs.

This action caused Koremitsu’s heart to race again.

“The hair?”

Koremitsu asked blankly, and Tsuyako gave a sweet expression, ostensibly in a blissful dream.

“Yes. Hikaru first approached me because he fell in love with my hair, saying that it is like the red weeping cherry blossoms..”

Her plump red lips broke into a smile.

“I was often dejected before that, wondering why I was not born with red hair instead. Hikaru however said that my hair is beautiful, and even kissed my hair a few times, even in this classroom…”

She lowered her eyelashes as she smiled, her cheeks slightly reddened as she probably recalled something.

This made her all the more beautiful, alluring,

(Hey! What did you do in this classroom!!!)

Koremitsu inadvertently panicked.

Hikaru too gave a sweet meaningful smile as he stared at Tsuyako, causing Koremitsu’s heart to race. It felt as if there was a sudden erotic scene while a family was watching television together in the living room.

Tsuyako was smiling blissfully, but her expression gradually gave way to sadness.

Koremitsu felt his heart ache, as if he had just witnessed something he should not have.

(Oh yeah…I think she was crying when I arrived…)

“Erm…”

Koremitsu spoke hesitantly,

“Did something happen today?”

“Hm?”

“You were crying before I came by, right?”

Her eyes were starting to flutter.

She seemed a little perplexed, and after a moment of silence, she smiled, holding Koremitsu by his hands as she stood up.

“How about a date with me, Mr Akagi?”

“Huh?”

“I will tell you Hikaru’s secrets.”

Hikaru panicked the moment he heard that,

“Eh? What is that about, Tsuyako!?”

“Alright, let us go then.”

She latched her soft arm around a panicky Koremitsu, and strolled out cheerfully.

“Hey, where’re we going. Hey!?”

“Tsuyako, what is that secret about!? What topic about me do you want to reveal to Koremitsu?”

Both of them continued to ask, clearly bewildered, but Tsuyako giggled, saying,

“You do not have to be so nervous. The first date is a healthy one.”

“Stop it. Let go of me!”

“Tsuyako, please keep the matter at the dormitory a secret! That goes for the culture festival, the gondola at the Tomakomai sky resort, and the swimming pool at the Imperial Hotel too…Koremitsu is rather inflexible about such things!”

Hikaru knew that she could not hear him, but he had his palms together as he earnestly begged.

Koremitsu really wanted to shake off Tsuyako’s arm. She however was not a hoodlum looking for trouble with him, but was a delicate lady, his upperclassman, ‘senpai’. He could hurt her if he was too violent, and upon realizing this, he did not dare to flail his limbs wildly.

The students still left in the school were utterly speechless to see Tsuyako, dressed in the red-pink kimono, walk alongside the savage-looking, red-haired Koremitsu.

“No way! Isn’t that the Moon Matriarch and the delinquent king?”

“Why’s she with that delinquent freshman? Isn’t she Lord Hikaru’s mistress?”

“I thought Akagi’s a lolicon?”

“The delinquent king managed to get the Moon Matriarch? Now she’s his mistress!”

Such chatter could be heard from everywhere.

Was the Moon Matriarch referring to Tsuyako?

I’m not a lolicon! I’m not a delinquent! And I’m definitely don’t remember having a mistress!

Koremitsu really wanted to yell, but if he were to do so, there would be rumors of the delinquent going berserk on the corridor again.

But if they were to make up such rumors, while it would be nothing for Koremitsu, would Tsuyako not be overly hurt?

“Hey, senpai. Those guys are saying things like mistress and such. It think it’s better to let go of me…”

Koremitsu whispered, and Tsuyako widened her eyes as she stared back, before smiling gently,

“Are you worried about me? You sure are a good child, but it is fine. I am used to hearing others slander about, so I do not really mind.”

Koremitsu was gobsmacked to hear her say such words with a straight face.

And just as she said, she lifted her face, looking very cheerful.

(Is senpai trying to act tough?)

Koremitsu found her to be dazzling.

“You see, Akagi, there was a girl who was so mesmerized seeing Hikaru that she missed a step and fell from the stairs there. Hikaru wanted to catch her, but he was not strong enough, and fell along with me. I ended up having to call the ambulance in the end.”

Tsuyako giggled as she pointed at the stairs.

“Hikaru often came by to the High School Affiliate when he was in Middle School, and there was once when he was playing the piano in the music room. Many girls gathered there, to a point where the door was pushed down, and he was punished to write 10 reflection essays, ‘I will not play musical instruments so carelessly in front of everyone’. He really was dejected about that.”

She giggled as she said.

And so, she strolled lightly, saying,

“There were often girls handing the
ohagi
and

chikuzenni
they make to Hikaru in front of that cooking classroom. He would always accept whatever they gave him, and had to put all the food in the freezer and eat them."

And also,

"Sometimes, he would eat too much till he had a tummy upset, and would groan on the tatami in the Japanese Dance Club; because of that, it is necessary to prepare some stomach medication there."

And,

"There was a Valentine's Day where he ate 12 boxes of chocolate at one go, and suddenly had a nosebleed at the window here. The window and floor were all covered in his blood, but he kept covering his face with tissue paper, and even said, 'I will feel happy if I think of this as a trial of love. I do not know how many boxes I have to eat before I get a nosebleed next time. Sure is exciting'. That was really funny."

She started to reveal one of Hikaru's secrets after another(?).

And Hikaru was blushing, flailing in the air as he shouted,

"Tsu-Tsuyako, that is enough already. You are making me sound like a fool!"

He continued to yap unhappily in the air.

However, Tsuyako continued to reminiscence about the past, her face beaming.

One could say this was a revisit of all of Hikaru’s silly matters instead of a date.

Tsuyako was so happy talking about Hikaru,

(So this is the kind of people who likes to smile…)

Koremitsu felt an itch in his heart the instant he thought about this. Hikaru had always said that he was too serious, that he should date someone who liked to laugh.

He even mentioned that he would find such a girl.

It was true that anyone would be cheerful when being with a bubbly person. It would not matter to him then even if the people around him kept their distance.

“I said to Hikaru ‘It is tough being everyone’s prince’, but he smiled happily while stuffing his nostrils with tissue paper. ‘I simply love all the flowers in the world’ That was what he answered. He then wrote the girls’ names, the classes they belong to, and their unique traits on cue cards, trying his best to memorize them.”

“Ahh~ please do not recall and say anything else, Tsuyako!”

This was the first time Koremitsu had seen Hikaru being so flustered.

He suddenly realized that the ‘Hikaru’ Tsuyako talked of was different from Aoi’s, Yū’s and Shioriko’s accounts.

(Huh? You got nosebleeds from eating too much chocolates? And you memorized the girls’ names through cue cards? You boasted that your memory increases tenfold if it’s regarding girls.)

Koremitsu snickered as he teased Hikaru, but as he was not used to smiling, ‘the delinquent king has such a vile expression’, such chatter could be heard from the onlookers, and they pulled their distances from him.

“HIkaru is affectionate, but is too indecisive, and does have some mood swings, is half-hearted, really likes to woo girls, many at one go even…”

Tsuyako turned her head towards Koremitsu, smiling sweetly.

It was a gentle expression filled with love.

“But why did all the girls fall in love with Hikaru? Why did they love him so? Do you understand, Mr Akagi?”

She continued to stare at Koremitsu’s eyes gently.

“…Who knows?”

Koremitsu murmured, feeling a little nervous.

“Because he gave the girls what they needed.”

“What they needed?”

“Sweet talk, riveting emotions, honest love, promises…he gave them all without holding back. He truly lover all the flowers, as if he is watering upon them.”

That might be the case.

Hikaru had been giving them everything they wanted.

Hikaru’s ‘promises’ were necessary for them all.

“Did you…make a ‘promise’ with Hikaru?”

Tsuyako lowered her eyes slightly.

“Yes, we made a very important promise.”

Her voice and eyes were showing grief.

Hikaru too looked unsettled.

Tsuyako then whispered,

“But the promise Hikaru made with me…can no longer be fulfilled.”

Koremitsu felt his heart wrench upon hearing this.

At this moment, two girls could be heard as they turned around the corner.

“Why don’t we have gelato after school today, Hono? They’re sold at half price today.”

“Okay, I want the bitter chocolate flavor with added bitterness.”

One of them was Koremitsu’s classmate, the class represenative with braids. THe other was the girl with fierce looking eyes–Honoka Shikibu!

(ACK!)

Koremitsu widened his eyes in shock, and Honoka too gasped.

Tsuyako’s arm was intertwined with Koremitsu’s.

Honoka’s naturally raised eyes were raised further.

And her shoulders were quivering.

(Wait, calm down! I didn’t do anything wrong to Shikibu! We’re just classmates! Even if she sees me with other women, there’s nothing to be anxious about…!)

While Koremitsu was struggling to convince himself.

Honoka looked dumbfounded and outraged as she shrieked,

“Y-You cheater!”

She then slammed the bag with the lunch box upon him, and turned to run off.

“Ho-Hono! Wait for me!”

The class representative with braided hair stared at Honoka and Koremitsu apprehensively, before running off after the former.

Tsuyako widened her eyes in surprise, asking, “Eh? Is that your girlfriend? No way? You really have one?”

Hikaru could only mutter with sympathy,
“Miss Shikibu…really picked an inopportune time.”

“Since when was I cheating!? That violent woman!”

He growled as he pressed on his aching head.

Chapter 3

(Ahh! What was I doing, seriously—!?)

At night.

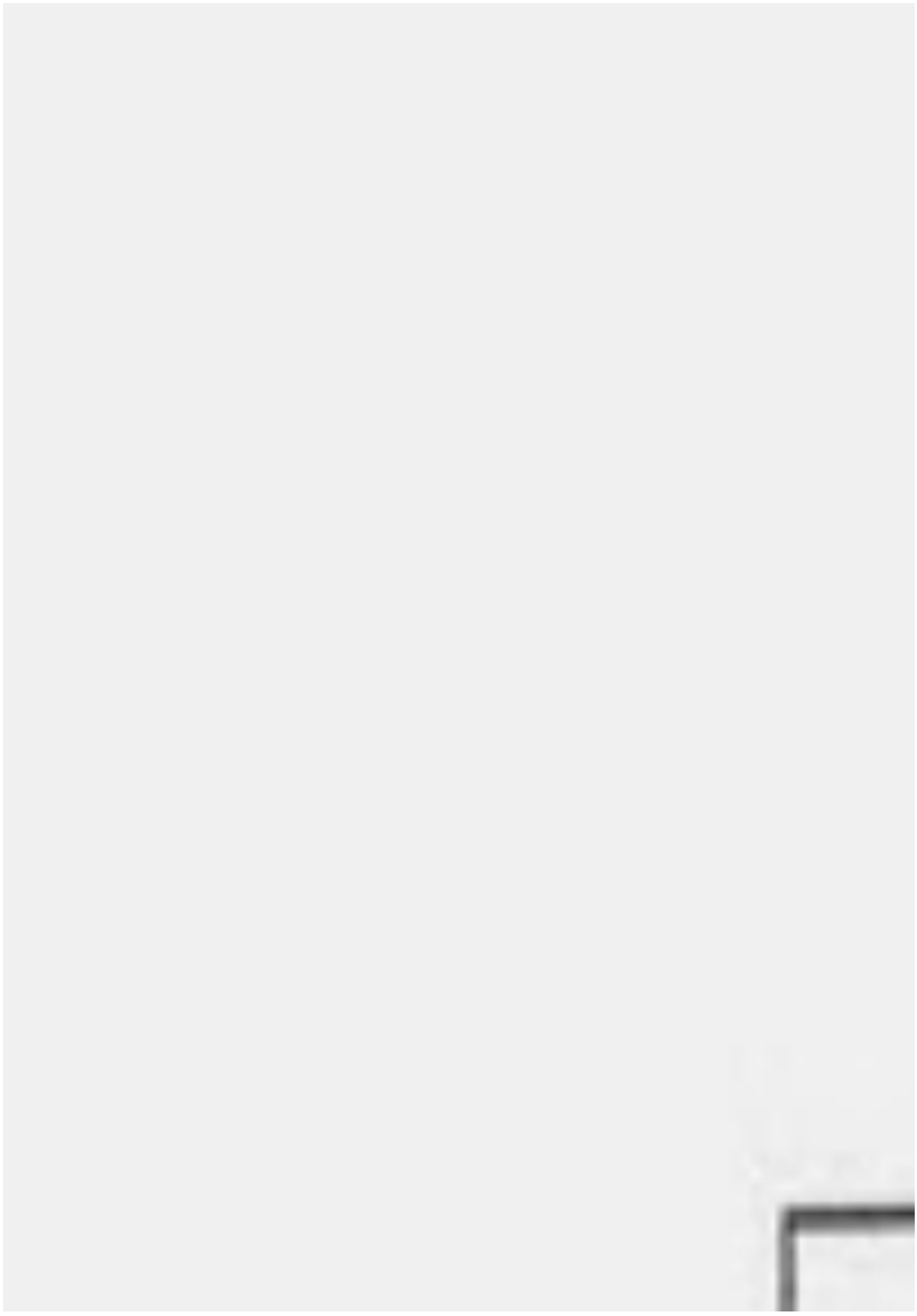
Honoka was feeling completely dejectedly as she laid prone on her desk.

Even the red-purple cellphone was thrown aside.

She intended to send Koremitsu messages a few times, only to delete them, and rewrite again.

(I’m not his girlfriend, and I’m feeling jealous of other girls, yapping away on the corridor. Michiru and that Moon Matriarch’s there too. I even threw my lunch box onto Akagi and ran away—argh, I’m really a big idiot!!)

She leaned her face on the table, flailing her limbs.



The instance she saw the upperclassman, the Moon Matriarch, latch herself bewitchingly onto Koremitsu with her snowy white arm, Honoka felt her head sizzle, all composure devoid from her.

(He’s locking arms with that famous Moon Matriarch; that’s too sudden already!)

This Moon Matriarch, Tsuyako Udate, was of nobility similar to Aoi, and was a famous person, having appeared in a magazine interview as a shining rookie in the Japanese Dance circle.

She had silky red hair, a glamorous face, and an alluring body. Her still presence alone would attract the stares of those surrounding her.

If 100 people were taken for a questionnaire, at least 99 of them would call her an absolute beauty.

There were all sorts of pretty girls amongst the normal high school students, like Honoka. Some of them are a little pretty, some are barely called pretty, and some are beauties who can only look pretty are dolling up. Tsuyako was not this case however, she was a certified, superstar level of a beauty.

(Why’s such a super beauty with Akagi?)

Honoka had been concerned about Koremitsu and Aoi before this had happened, and even posted a comment on a love consultation forum,

“

I am a little attracted to a certain guy in my class, but a super-cute princess asked him to be her boyfriend. What do I do?

By Hono Hono.”

Normally, Honoka would post her sweet cellphone novels using her online avatar, the Purple Princess, and even settle some girls’ love troubles.

“Ri-Right, let’s go ask on the forum again.”

She immediately got up, and hurriedly tapped on the cellphone, her heart practically clutching at straws.

“

There’s a super beauty being too close with a guy I have a crush on.

When I saw them walking with their arms latched together, I couldn’t help but scold him for being a cheater…
□p>□<q*□

Will he think that I’m annoying? □+(°´Д□°)+□

What do I do with him in the future?

By Hono Hono.”

Soon after sending the message, Honoka’s face was flushed red.

(Seriously…seriously…)

She continued to swivel along with the chair,

“WHAT AM I DOING HERE!!?

And she yelled,

“I’m not supposed to be such an annoying bimbo!! I’m supposed to be the love expert, the Purple Princess! The reliable and friendly big sister!! What’s with this Hono Hono!!

AAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!! THIS IS EMBRASSING! I DON’T DARE TO LOOK AT MY CELLPHONE NOW!!”

Perhaps she should not think about Koremitsu again.

Right, why was she concerned with that cheater of a man? She had assumed that he was fully devoted to Aoi, but hooked himself up with a hikkikomori, had a scandal with an elementary school girl, and this time, got a beautiful upperclassman.

“Those cheating men are the worst!”

Though Tsuyako Udate was famous, her reputation however was bad.

Soon after she entered the elementary school branch from the kindergarten, she was transferred to a girls school of nobility in England, and only returned to Japan suddenly soon after her 1st year in High School.

There were gossips that she was expelled because she had a scandal with a boy, and there were also rumors that she was unabashedly meeting Lord Hikaru in the Japanese Dance clubroom. Some even said that if she had a fancy in a man, she would lure him in, and dump him when she had enough…the way she dumped others was as vicious as that of stabbing someone in the heart with a smile.

(Eh, Akagi looks very fierce, but he’s very naive and has no immunity to girls. He definitely fell into the honey trap easily~~~~)

The next morning, Honoka continued to sit at her place, looking melancholic as she held onto her cellphone tightly.

(What do I do? Do I remind Akagi to be careful of the Moon Matriarch? But if I do that, he'll definitely hate me…)

At this moment, Koremitsu walked in from the back door, his back slouched like usual.

Michiru, the class representative who was on good terms with Honoka, spoke timidly,

"Go-Good morning, Mr Akagi."

"…Oh."

Koremitsu coldly replied.

"You're frowning more than usual today, Mr Akagi, you look really savage… forget I said anything!"

Michiru hurried back to her own seat, and Honoka was tensely listening to his footsteps, cold like his voice, her heart pounding wildly.

The footsteps stopped beside her, and the sounds of the bag being thrown onto the table and the chair being dragged out could be heard.

Honoka’s heart was pounding madly, almost popping out from her mouth.

(Uu…I really want to ask why he was with the Moon Matriarch yesterday. I’m just his classmate who ‘likes’ him a little, and if I ask them whether they did some pervy things in that clubroom after that—no, Akagi’s not someone so easily charmed like that. He just broke up with Miss Kanai, Her Highness Aoi, and he’s Shiiko’s big brother. He can’t possibly do something shameless that an elementary school kid will find shameful of. Bu-Bu-but, Akagi said that he likes big breasted girls the last time we saw those swimsuit photos. I only have a C cup; the Moon Matriarch has more to show if she strips herself…)

Honoka started to imagine the two of them being alone in the clubroom, Tsuyako dressed in a kimono opening her crumpled collar,

“Hey, my sash is loose…please help me tie it, Mr Akagi.”

She leans over as she says this, and Koremitsu looks panicky, his face completely red.

(STOP IT! DON’T TOUCH AKAGI!)

Honoka screamed in her heart, and at that moment.

“Hey.”

Koremitsu, who was supposed seated beside her, was standing beside her this time, shocking her.

He placed the lunchbox she threw the previous day on the table.

“You forgot something.”

He sounded and looked really unhappy.

Of course, it was natural for him to be angry.

“Ah, y-you picked it up for me…?”

(What am I playing dumb for!? I should at least thank him right? No, I should be apologizing to him regarding yesterday instead of that first…)

“I-I say…”

However, Honoka’s words were full of spite.

“I want to warn you as a classmate. You don’t have friends, so you probably never heard of the rumors. I saw you being so friendly with Tsuyako Udate.”

Koremitsu’s eyebrows rose.

However, Honoka could not stop.

Suppressing the urge to hide under the table, she continued,

“She’s very famous in this school as the Moon Matriarch, but there’re bad rumors about her, like she’s very good at manipulating men, and that she dumps them if she gets tired of them…”

Honoka felt bitterness in her mouth.

Her throat was in agony, as if it was suffocated.

(No, this isn’t what I wanted to say to him.)

She did not want to say such vexing things.

She did not want Koremitsu to see herself in such a putrid state.

“Are you being fooled about, Akagi?”

She tried her best to eke out a voice.

At this moment, Koremitsu glared at her, and raised his voice, saying,

“Don’t say something baseless. You aren’t that type of person, right?”

Honoka felt her heart freeze.

(Akagi despises me now!)

She knew that Koremitsu never treated her as a girl, but she hoped to be at least someone he could trust and talk with, a classmate.

Her legs felt limp, and she felt an urge to cry, furious at this blockhead of a guy who did not understand her feelings at all.

“It-It’s your fault though…we agreed to go to the pool…I was the first one…”

(Right, I made an appointment with Akagi before Her Highness Aoi did. He forgot about everything here! But Akagi only agreed somewhat because I forcefully invited him. Maybe he doesn’t want to go there at all, but I’ve been looking forward to it…)

“What’re you murmuring about. If you’re not happy, just say it.”

Koremitsu frowned.

All emotions swelled till her throat, and she lashed out,

“DID YOU FORGET THAT I SAID I LIKED YOU!?”

The instant these words came out, she was dumbfounded.

Wh-What am I doing…?

Koremitsu’s mouth was agape, absolutely speechless.

And also,

The classmates greeting each other went quiet, her good friend, the braided bespectacled girl, was covering her mouth with both hands, looking astounded.

The class was completely quiet.

(WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!! I’M REALLY A BIG IDIOT!)

Honoka was so abashed her face was sizzling.

“Th-That’s not it! I don’t mean ‘like’! Not that at all! I mean ‘hike’! I haven’t been going out to experience the earth!”

(I might as well die right now…)

She had always played the role of the ‘cool and reliable Miss Shikibu.

But the image she worked so hard to cultivate was gradually breaking down.

At this moment.

A giggle could be heard from nearby.

Tsuyako was standing at the back door.

Her glossy red hair was draped upon her voluptuous breasts, the tail swaying gently by the waist.

She was akin to an actress standing in the midst of the spotlights, gracefully strolling to Koremitsu with everyone looking upon her, narrowing her eyes bewitchingly as she said,

“Thank you for speaking up for me, Mr Akagi.”

“What do you mean?”

Koremitsu frowned, probably feeling awkward about this.

Upon seeing this, Honoka’s heart sank further.

Tsuyako smiled, and said,

“I have come to invite you. Will you like to come to our club practice during noon break?”

Club practice? What’s that about? Did Akagi join the Japanese Dance Club? For the Moon Matriarch?

Honoka watched Tsuyako carefully, and found her outstandingly beautiful, her breasts something Honoka could not compare to.

(I-I’m just being a foul-hearted classmate here!)

She bit her lips anxiously, wondering whether to lock herself in the bathroom…

Tsuyako then turned to Honoka.

She showed an earnest smile, saying to the leery Honoka,

“Would you like to pay us a visit?”

♢ ♢ ♢

(Isn’t this development too weird or something? When did things end up like this?)

A few days later, after school–

With his back slouched, Koremitsu was seated cross-legged in a corner of the tatamis.

Tsuyako was in the middle of the classroom, dressed in a red-collared blue kimono with a red sash around her, dancing elegantly with a red fan; Honoka and the class representative with braids were gaping from the side, mesmerized.

“Upperclassman Tsuyako’s amazing…”

“Yes, she’s really pretty, Hono.”

A few days ago, Honoka was frowning, saying, “She’s famous, but there’re bad rumors about her”.

Once Koremitsu heard her say these words she typically would not say, he could not help but refute her, and Honoka’s loud declaration reverberated throughout the class…the situation was shambolic.

However,

“Would you like to pay us a visit?”

Tsuyako invited her, and she went to the clubroom with her mouth pouted, the atmosphere claudicant. Once Tsuyako opened her crimson fan and started dancing, Honoka was enthralled by it all, watching with her mouth opened.

Once Tsuyako finished dancing, Honoka seemed to have snapped out of a trance as her shoulders jerked, turning her face away unhappily. Once Tsuyako spoke to her however, her face would turn red, flustered by this.

On the way back to the classroom, her face remained red, her vision swimming about as she spoke to Koremitsu,

“Erm…I-I think…I had a misunderstanding about her.”

At that moment, Koremitsu realized that something was amiss.

At this point, Honoka had become a devout fan of Tsuyako, and would often drag the class representative in braids to the clubroom.

Tsuyako smiled as she closed the fan, and both of them started clapping passionately, running to her.

“That’s amazing! Really amazing, upperclassman Tsuyako! Ahh, that was beautiful! I just searched your name on the internet, and everyone has been praising you, saying that you’re the red dancing princess! I feel really proud too!”

“I-I found photos of your performances on the internet too! Your red hair on the white kimono was amazingly beautiful!”

Both Honoka and the class representative sounded really excited, and their smiles became more pronounced whenever Tsuyako smiled.

“Thank you. I have a dance exhibition within this month. If you have the time, I will like to invite you.”

“Ehhhh? Really!? I’ll definitely go!”

“M-Me too!”

Both of them cheered and squealed as they flailed about.

(Hey…)

Shikibu, isn't your attitude completely different now?

She always looked cold and aloof in front of Koremitsu, but became so chatty and noisy at this point. Though he had known that girls were temperamental like the weather, he was so amazed by this drastic change he had personally witnessed that he was unable to feel angry at all.

Hikaru sat beside Koremitsu with a knee tucked to his chest, showing a rational smile as he spoke with a clear and gentle voice,

"Girls are attracted by other beautiful girls after all. Tsuyako and Miss Shikibu are rather alike, straightforward, enthusiastic and pragmatic. Tsuyako too like girls like Miss Shikibu, so naturally, they do meet eye to eye."

"Is that so…I really don't understand women."

Koremitsu was worried when Tsuyako invited Honoka, wondering what would happen. He was flabbergasted to find out however that they got on so amicably.

Till this day, the stalker Tsuyako spoke of had yet to appear, and she had been living quite the pleasant life every single day.

(She asked me to help her, but it doesn’t look like there’s anything I can help.)

She said she was troubled, that she did not know what to do, that if she were to keep this up, perhaps the flowers Hikaru so treasured would be wrecked, and requested him to watch over her.

Was that simply an excuse for him to join the Japanese Dance club?

Koremitsu again turned to look at his friend.

Hikaru sat quietly, his leg still raised, maintaining this position even when Tsuyako danced, watching blissfully as his eyes narrowed.

The deep gaze was ostensibly loving every single move the hands made, every single twist her neck did whenever she danced, wanting to embrace her in his clutches.

“…”

On the way home after his date with Tsuyako in the school, Koremitsu and Hikaru were walking down the dirt path under the sunset.

–What’s your promise with that upperclassman?

Koremitsu recalled the question he asked Hikaru before.

Hikaru’s shoulders shuddered, looking gloomy.

He then replied hoarsely,

–When Tsuyako dances on stage next time, I will definitely be in the stands, applauding her more than anyone else.

The thin strands of hair draped upon the pale cheeks swayed weakly, the neck and shoulders slumped feebly.

The grass lying by the roadside swayed forlornly, seemingly reflecting Hikaru’s feelings.

Koremitsu’s voice too became hoarse.

–Well…you can’t do that now. You’re dead.

–Yeah…

–What do we do?

–What do we do, indeed…?

Neither of them spoke after that.

Hikaru often said that Tsuyako’s dance was unique.

He promised that whenever she got on stage to dance, he would be in the audience marveling at her. Those definitely were his sincere thoughts.

But this promise would never be fulfilled.

Even Koremitsu would not be able to fulfill this for him.

Tsuyako should be hoping for Hikaru to watch her perform personally.

It was meaningless for others to take over.

(What do we do…Hikaru…?)

Koremitsu harbored bitter feelings as he asked quietly.

Tsuyako, Honoka and Michiru were chatting happily, and as Hikaru watched over them gently, his expression seemed so fragile.

Tsuyako seemed to be guiding the duo on their dance movements as she stood beside Michiru, sometimes raising the latter by the arm, sometimes turning her neck, causing Michiru to blush as she followed suit.

At this moment, Hikaru spoke gently with a warm yet forlorn voice.

He seemed to have sensed the melancholy in Koremitsu's heart,

"Koremitsu, I…I hope that Tsuyako can continue to dance, for her dance is really unique…when she dances, she looks like the red weeping cherry blossom."

The prayerful tone stabbed Koremitsu's heart.

What he and Hikaru could only do was the pray.

(She wouldn't tell me why she's crying, and she looks so happy, smiling whenever she talks about Hikaru…)

Tsuyako was probably strong enough to accept that the promise could not be fulfilled.

In that case, perhaps the reason why she pulled Koremitsu into the Japanese Dance club was simply to chat with Hikaru's friend, just as Hikaru himself had said. The date she had with Koremitsu in the school was probably to reminisce the places where she made her memories with him, to mourn for her dead

lover…

(I really don’t understand what women think about…)

If Tsuyako really hoped for it, Koremitsu could accompany her to the clubroom everyday after school, until the day she could let go.

(I really didn’t like calling her ‘senpai’ at first, but I guess I’m used to it now…)

He was instead happy that he had someone he could call ‘senpai’, and that he had a place for himself.

For he used to be alone all the time, and never joined any clubs…

Such a notion was too embarrassing, so he never said this to Hikaru.

At this moment, Honoka walked towards Koremitsu, and sat beside him silently.

(Ack…)

Koremitsu was tense all over.

Honoka pouted as she tucked her legs to her chest, cupping them; after some silence, she muttered,

“…Sorry for causing you trouble recently.”

“…No biggie. Maybe my attitude wasn’t good either way.”

Tsuyako was still guiding Michiru on the latter’s dancing, and the latter was embraced from behind, her braids swaying frantically.

“I was mistaken. Upperclassman Tsuyako’s beautiful, whether she’s walking or sitting, whatever she does is beautiful. She’s like a celestial when she dances, unlike us high school students. She’s so cheerful, straightful. I really admire her, I want to be like her.”

“Really? You’re like her, you know.”

Koremitsu spoke as per Hikaru’s opinion.

“No seriously, I’m not like her. She’s of a completely different level from me!”

Honoka placed her hands on her cheeks, looking flustered.

And then, she smiled cheerfully,

“I know such a wonderful person can’t possibly fall for you. I’m relaxed now.”

Her refreshed expression was practically bleached through, showing nary a tint of spite as she seemed to sincerely think so.

“What do you mean by that!?”
Koremitsu grumbled.

Upon eavesdropping on their conversation, Hikaru chuckled.

“It is great that Miss Shikibu has finally understood, Koremitsu. Your relationship with her is now as good as before.”

(AS IF!)

“Are you making fun of me or something?”

“Not at all. I’m saying the truth.”

“Isn’t that worse!?”

“Stop yelling into my ear!”

“Isn’t that your fault!”

As both of them continued to bicker, Tsuyako suddenly interjected,

“Oh ho, both of you have quite the relationship going there.”

Both of them turned around, and found that Tsuyako and Michiru were already in front of them, watching.

Tsuyako leaned her body forward, giving a teasing smile like a big sister. Michiru’s eyes widened beneath the glasses, looking really panicky.

“H-Ho-Ho-Ho-Ho-Hono! You and Mr Akagi are…”

“What are you saying, Michiru!? I already said things aren’t like that! How can I possibly have something going on with this delinquent!?”

Honoka’s face went beetroot as she exclaimed.

And Tsuyako then teased her,

“Is that so? Are you really not dating Mr Akagi, Miss Shikibu? You look quite compatible with each other, so I thought I was right.”

“!!”

Honoka’s eyes widened, unable to say anything.

Koremitsu too shrieked,

“Th-That’s stupid! That’s not it, senpai! Shikibu and I are just classmates…”

“Th-th-th-th-that’s right! You’re mistaken, upperclassman Tsuyako!”

“Uu…Hono…”

“Why’re you looking at me suspiciously, Michiru!? Why’re you retreating? It’s really not like that!”

“Yeah, Miss Shikibu was talking about hiking back then.”

“…!”

Honoka was unable to say anything for she was teased to such an extent. Tsuyako then leaned over to her ear, and whispered,

“Tell me about that ‘hiking’ next time. I will not tell Mr Akagi.”

“Up-Upperclassman Tsuyako…! Th-that’s…!”

Honoka’s face was completely red as Tsuyako beamed.

“What’re you whispering about.”

“Just some little hushed words between girls, is that right, Miss Shikibu?”

“Th-This…”

Tsuyako giggled as she gently watched Honoka as the latter nervously fidgeted her fingers,

The earnest, innocent smile was exactly the same as Hikaru’s as he floated beside Koremitsu, smiling.

Are lovers similar even in this? Or perhaps it was because they were similar in this aspect that they got on well with each other?

Well, never mind. Hikaru has as many lovers as there are flowers. There’s nothing worth thinking about it.

At this moment, the door to the classroom was opened.

There was a person with black flowing hair standing outside, a white ribbon tied upon it.

(Eh…? Aoi?)

Koremitsu was thunderstruck within once he said the delicate princess standing outside.

Aoi’s stare was hovering about, looking timid. Once she saw Koremitsu however, her expression eased somewhat as she seemed relieved.

Right beside Koremitsu was Honoka, whose shoulders quivered slightly, looking tense.

“What’s the matter, Aoi?”

Koremitsu walked to the door, and Aoi hesitated for a moment, her face flushed, before she spoke nervously,

“I want to talk to you about tomorrow…I just called you on the phone, but you never replied…”

“Ah, sorry, my phone’s in my bag, so I didn’t notice.”

“No, it is fine. I should be the one apologize. I should not have come here to look for you.”

Aoi bowed deeply, her flowing black hair swaying along with her gesture.

However, once she lifted that pixie face of hers, she clearly looked tense.

With a harsh look, she glared behind Koremitsu.

(What? What’s with her now?)

He turned around, and found Tsuyako walking towards them, her expression as tense as Aoi’s.

(Eh? Why’re they staring at each other?)

Hikaru sighed once he saw this, and could only cover his face with a hand reluctantly.

Once Koremitsu realized the bizarreness of this situation, Tsuyako had already shown a rigid smile, saying,

“…It has been a while, Miss Aoi. We have not met since Hikaru’s funeral.”

Her eyes and lips were smiling, but she did not look like she was; even her voice sounded stern.

Aoi remained silent as she scowled back; it seemed she was unwilling to greet the other party.

Tsuyako’s voice was somewhat agitated,

“You did not look that well back then, but you seem rather lively well. I am glad about that.”

Suddenly, Aoi’s face was flushed with anger.

“…You do not have to worry about me! I still have yet to forgive you! I will despise you forever!”

“Hey! Aoi!”

Koremitsu was stunned, for such words were not something one would simply say so carelessly.

Honoka and Michiru too were stunned.

Aoi clenched her hands, her petite body shuddering as she took a deep breath to rein in her furor. She then turned away to leave.

“Wait Aoi! Sorry senpai, I gotta go!”

“Okay…go accompany Miss Aoi. She is still a child, she might need some time to collect herself.”

Tsuyako looked as if she was trying to showcase her restraint as she spoke in a monotonous manner, and Aoi, upon hearing that, spat back,

“I am not a child! I was born earlier than you!”

“Yes, amongst the three of us, including Miss Asai, you are the oldest, Miss Aoi… but you are also the shortest.”

“Please, Tsuyako, do not say anymore. Miss Aoi has always been sensitive of her height. Koremitsu, go chase after her!”

Hikaru looked lethargic as he broke into a frown.

Koremitsu grabbed his bag and gave chase.

As he went by Honoka, he noticed her biting her lips in a lonely manner. Having patched up after much difficulty, would she throw a tantrum again? Koremitsu

was perplexed by that, but he had to first handle Aoi’s business.

“See you later, Mr Akagi.”

Tsuyako stood at the door with a mature expression, waving her hand silently.

“Hey, Aoi! What’s your deal just now!”

Koremitsu huffed and puffed as he caught up to Aoi just as the latter was about to head downstairs. Aoi bit her lips, looking ready to break into tears as she angrily retorted,

“You can tell, right? I hate Miss Tsuyako!”

Koremitsu was in a dilemma once he heard her say this tearily.

“Ah…yeah…I guess…”

Thinking about it carefully, Aoi was betrothed, and yet Tsuyako had an affair with Hikaru, unabashedly proclaiming herself to be his mistress. Naturally, Aoi would not have tolerated it if Tsuyako had been like this when Hikaru was alive.

(Hikaru had so many girlfriends, but Aoi really hates senpai for some reason…)

Aoi’s shoulders shuddered as she lashed out,

“Miss Tsuyako was betrothed to Hikaru’s older brother! And she had an affair with Hikaru…”

(What!?)

Koremitsu turned over to Hikaru, and found the latter putting his hands together, looking apologetic.

(What are you apologizing for, you bastard!? Are you admitting that you had an affair with your brother’s fiancee!?)

“Miss Tsuyako transferred to the boarding academy in England during her second grade, and…she had a meeting with Hikaru in the dormitory when it was forbidden for men to enter. A teacher so happened to witness it, and she was expelled as a realize!”

(A meeting in the dormitory?)

Her face completely red, Aoi continued,

“Last spring, she returned to Japan, her engagement with Hikaru’s brother broken off. She continued to date Hikaru, and at the turf club resort during the Golden Week, she kissed Hikaru in front of everyone!”

(Ugh–HIKARU!!!!!!!!!!!!)

From what Hikaru himself and others had said, Koremitsu already knew that Hikaru was a harem prince without restraint.

However, he found out that Hikaru never did anything to
Yū, never dared to kiss Aoi, his fiancee, for fear of annoying, and was akin to a bumbling father to the elementary school girl Shioriko. Because of these, his opinion of Hikaru changed slightly, that perhaps it was a misunderstanding that Hikaru was assumed to be someone without restraint, that he was a decent person.

(And you dated a girl in a girl's dormitory where it's forbidden for men to enter!? You're the scum of Japanese men! You continued to date her after that? Is that some sort of sick thinking or something? Don't you feel sorry for your brother and Aoi!? So you were alone with senpai in the Japanese Dance Clubroom for your own tomfoolery!? Tōjō talked about you kissing a girl while riding on the horse, that was senpai right!?)

Koremitsu's veins were bulging as he gritted his teeth, his eyebrows raised at Hikaru.

Apprehensive, Hikaru slowly retreated,

"Ko-Koremitsu, you are scary now. That expression is vilish! You will scare Miss Aoi! Be gentle!"

(DON’T USE AOI AS A SHIELD, YOU SCUMBAG OF A HAREM PRINCE!)

Koremitsu’s blazing fury was not to be denied.

Aoi too could not control her anger as she continued to lash out in anguish,

“Hikaru soon died in the river after that, and I cannot forgive Miss Tsuyako when I think about how she had Hikaru’s last kiss!”

Her declaration and expression seemed to have broken Hikaru’s heart, for whenever she spoke, the latter could only groan.

“Miss Tsuyako does hate me too. She has been bullying me since our childhoods, and deliberately came to my garden…”

Aoi looked very agitated, and once she spoke till her, she suddenly stopped.

It seemed she suddenly recalled the term ‘being abashed’ as her eyebrows dropped slightly, her expression fragile.

“So-Sorry…I started grumbling to no end…I just felt uneasy when I heard that Miss Tsuyako latched arms with you around school and invited you to the Japanese Dance club…I thought you would be lured by her, so I came by to look at the situation. I wanted to confront her calmly…but when I see her, all the memories from before just appeared in my mind, so I could not help…i-it is

really embarrassing. You definitely find me annoying, right?”

Aoi covered her face with her hands as she turned around.

(What am I supposed to do now?)

The only one Koremitsu could plead for help to had already retreated out of the overt sense of guilt. It was because of this person that such a scenario occurred; naturally, Koremitsu could not ask him, and did not want to anyway.

Once he saw Aoi shrink back dejectedly, he blurted, wanting to encourage her,

“I won’t cheat on anyone! I’m devoted!”

Aoi turned around in shock.

Her eyes widened, her mouth slightly ajar.

“E-Erm…”

And a stupefied voice could be heard.

Hikaru too was gobsmacked to a point of breaking out from his funk.

(Eh? Did I say something wrong?)

But those were his true thoughts.

He knew Hikaru had his own troubles, that Hikaru truly loved every single flower, every single girl.

He also knew that Hikaru lingered on Earth to fulfill the promises he made to all the girls.

But even so…he could not accept how Hikaru dated so many girls at the same time, and he was committed to dating only one girl.

Aoi finally managed to breathe normally as her coral-colored lips exhaled slightly. She placed a hand in front of her chest, glanced up at Koremitsu as she looked down, and stammered,

“B-But…you called Miss Tsuyako as senpai…you must be on good terms with her…”

“You want me to call you that too? I’ll call you that then, Aoi-senpai.”

“Eh, well, that is…”

She seemed to have mixed feelings as she pondered for a few seconds,

“…I-I think it is better to just…call me Aoi.”

Aoi whispered shyly.

(Hm? What’s she shy about? What’s with her?)

Koremitsu seemed to be infected by her abashedness, and both of them remained silent, looking down awkward for quite a while.

“Erm…let’s go home. I’ll walk you back.”

Looking shy yet chuffed to bits, Aoi answered,

“Okay.”

Behind Koremitsu, Hikaru grumble,

“I am simply a useless harem prince after all. Miss Aoi has scolded me countless times around. She hates me for being insincere.”

The pair walked to the bus stop 3 stops away from the one Aoi usually boarded.

Aoi walked slowly, and Koremitsu had to cautiously slow himself down to match her pace.

Hikaru looked as lethargic as ever as he followed behind them, his shoulders slumped.

He looked as gloomy as a ghost (though he was one),
“I am hated”,
and would occasionally say such things that would unnerve even Koremitsu.

“Erm, Asa is attending some enterprise management meeting tomorrow, so she will not be able to attend the garden party…I can say more things there.”

“Oh, that’s great. It’ll be troublesome if Saiga’s around.”

“Actually, Asa is not that kind of a cold-hearted person.”

“Really?”

Koremitsu questioned skeptically.

“She likes to collect animal pictures, and often go out to watch touching moves. She refused me when I asked to go with her; I guess that is because she does not want me to see her wailing.”

(That Asai Saiga with the poker face will bawl like a baby when watching movies!?)

IMPOSSIBLE!
Koremitsu retorted silently.

(But she did help me when Shiiko was in trouble, and Hikaru often spoke up for her. Maybe she does have her good points.)

He then boarded the bus along with Aoi, and sent her home.

Aoi stood in front of her house, smiling as she said,

“Please take care of me tomorrow.”

And Hikaru–

“Koremitsu, you do have quite the chemistry with Miss Aoi. Am I bothering you two just by being here? Shall I ascend to the afterlife sooner?”

Clearly, he was affected by everything that had transpired.

♢ ♢ ♢

(AKAGI’S AN IDIOT!!!)

It was sunset, and Honoka was tapping at her cellphone, furious as she walked down the street.

“Hello there, Purple Princess.

I’m the Cinnamon Roll who talked to you about T from the handball club I belong to.

Thanks to your suggestion, my relationship with him has improved, and now we’re going home together after club activities. Currently, we’re just good friends in the club, but I want to confess during the summer camp.

Recently though, there has been a girl sketching in a corner of the school. That girl looks very demure like a princess, and is very cute. The male members are all excited, saying that the girl was looking at themselves.

T seems to be attracted to her, and even told me ‘what do I do if she suddenly confesses to me’. Does that mean I have no hope now?

Please give me some suggestions, Purple Princess.”

Honoka quickly tapped at the keys, replying to the questions flooding her message board.

“Hello there, Cinnamon Roll.

It’s already a great improvement that you’re able to go home together with T!

You did it!
□(^
∇
^)□

I know you’re worried about the girl who keeps sketching, but guys always admire those beautiful girls who are hard to attain.

Don’t worry! T will choose you to be with him in the end, a cute girl who has the same interests as him–that’s you, Cinnamon Roll!

You can try attracting his attention by saying something like ‘I’ll be troubled if that girl confesses to you…’

The most important thing is to say it carelessly though! T’s heart will race because of that!

Do your best, Cinnamon Roll! I’m looking forward to good news from you~
y(`□□)y

(Right, it’ll be tough getting to a girl that’s unattainable. It’s easier to get along with a girl more approachable and who likes him back.)

Once she sent this message, Honoka felt an aching in her heart.

(Akagi doesn’t understand at all…)

She was so shocked when she saw Aoi at the Japanese Dance clubroom that she forgot to breathe.

Aoi looked around the clubroom uneasily, and the way she smiled once she found him was really adorable.

She was Lord Hikaru’s fiancee, dubbed as Her Highness, and was truly a Princess amongst the many nobles in the school. She had a pure, adorable look, but it was because of her purity that others found it difficult to approach her.

She never expected Aoi to show such a relieved, gentle expression.

(Every guy will fall head over heels when girls look at them with such trust. Definitely, Akagi too…)

It was really unexpected to hear her say such words about Tsuyako, but on a second thought, it was definitely reasonable. Aoi was once Hikaru's fiancee, and Tsuyako unabashedly proclaimed herself to be Hikaru's lover; naturally, Aoi would not be on good terms with her.

After Aoi stormed out of the room, Koremitsu hurried after her without looking at Honoka.

"…Akagi really likes Her Highness Aoi after all…even after he was dumped by her, he must have really liked her…"

Honoka's thoughts became more pessimistic, and she slapped herself on the face.

"That's enough already. I'm becoming an irritating again! Don't think about Akagi! I need to stop thinking about him."

She chided herself as she said this, but immediately thought,

(Akagi and Her Highness Aoi…where are they dating tomorrow?)

Her heart ached further.

At this moment, her cellphone rang.

“Argh, who’s calling now?”

Once she saw the caller, she felt angrier.

“What?”

Honoka’s tone was not welcoming in the slightest, but the caller who annoyed her did not mind.

“Ah, is that Miss Shikibu~ I’m Hiina Oumi of the newspaper club, here to help troubled girls~ I’m sending over information this lovestruck Miss Shikibu will want~”

Honoka actually intended to hang up on the phone once she heard that rapid-fire teasing.

But before she could do so, Hiina spoke up first,

“Do you want to do some part-time work, Miss Shikibu?”

Chapter 4

“Hey, am I dressed too shabbily or something? Should I have borrowed gramps’ haori hakama?”

That night, during the garden party.

Koremitsu’s back was slouched as he wandered around the garden of Aoi’s acquaintance, obviously looking lost.

“A haori here will look like a formal meeting; since you are a student, a uniform will do. Besides, the Heian Academy uniform is pretty too.”

Hikaru encouraged.

But though he said so, Koremitsu could only see adults dressed in expensive suits or kimonos, and he could not find anyone else dressed in a school uniform.

This English-styled garden was spacious, to a point one would not assume it to be part of a person’s home. The lighting was as bright as noon, and there were a few round tables with pure white tablecloths on them, dishes of smoked duck and roasted beef laid out on silver platter, with professional chefs to cut them.

Aoi had said that it was a casual party where everyone stood around and ate, so Koremitsu imagined it to be like a barbeque at the seaside or the food stall, but that was not the case.

The female attendants were dressed in white shirts, black vests, and tight skirts, and they went around with silver trays in tow, serving glasses of champagne.

(I don’t belong to this world. I wanna go home~)

“Koremitsu, do not panic. Just act like usual and raise your eyebrows, give that stiff expression, and that ‘I’ll kill you if you dare belittle me’ look.”

(I’m no different from a delinquent then!)

Hikaru was most probably used to being in such occasions, and thus, he was unable to comprehend why Koremitsu was being so restless.

(Of course that’s to be expected of a Little Princeling with enough pocket money to buy a house for an elementary school kid!)

Speaking of which, when Koremitsu left the house, Shioriko pestered him, “Where’re you going? It’s not good to go out to play at such a late time. I’m coming along too!”

(Good thing she didn’t come along.)

Koremitsu was so preoccupied that he could not be bothered to take care of his ‘little sister’.

“Where’s Aoi?”

He looked around, and subconsciously went off to a less crowded.

“Mr Akagi.”

A person called out to him softly.

Tsuyako was standing in a dim corner, dressed in a red floral long-sleeved kimono and a crimson sash. A portion of her glossy red hair was bundled on her head, while the rest was draped naturally.

The dim moonlight was reflected upon her red hair and sleeves, the sight radiantly alluring.

“Senpai, why are you here?”

“Are you looking for Miss Aoi?”

Tsuyako revealed her face which looked whiter than usual, and smiled silently.

“Yeah.”

He never expected Tsuyako to attend the garden party, and this really was worse than meeting Asai at this place.

He recalled the scuffle that happened at the clubroom the previous day, and upon imagining what would happen if the two of them were to meet, he felt his gut wrench.

At that moment,
“Koremitsu.”
Hikaru muttered with a stiff voice.

Koremitsu motioned his stare aside, and found the latter staring at Tsuyako’s feet with a frozen, horrified look.

He too was shocked to see the red flowers scattered pitifully around. There were whole flowers and pruned petals, resembling a trail of blood when shown under the dim moonlight.

He felt his neck and shoulders stiffen, weighing him down, a chill occurring in his heart.

His stare slowly drifted from her feet to her waist, and knees to her chest. At that moment, he realized that the Crape Myrtle growing behind her were all devoid of flowers.

(Did she do it? The flowers by her feet are–)

A new chill wormed through Koremitsu’s spine again.

Tsuyako did say before that she was the one who pruned the flowers in the school garden.

And that she did it in a moment of impulse, because of loneliness and anxiety.

At that time, her tone was cheerful and carefree, and it sounded like a joke.

But was what she said real?

“You cannot leave.”

A pair of frosty hands grabbed Koremitsu’s arm.

Her eyes were lifeless, shrouded in haze like a shadowy moon. Koremitsu watched this scene in fear.

–I really am troubled.

Her eyes were this hazy when she stopped Koremitsu in the clubroom.

–If this keeps up, I might end up destroying the flowers Hikaru treasures.

She lowered her head, her red hair scattered upon her face, her lips quivering as she clasped her shoulders.

Was all those happenings really not an act?

–Mr Akagi…can you help me…? Can you please keep watch on me so that I do not destroy them?

Was that anguished voice the real deal?

Tsuyako spoke to a still, dumbfounded Koremitsu with a monotonous tone,

“Be with me here. Do not go to Miss Aoi. I will ‘prune’ flowers like her if you do otherwise.”

The damp wind caused her red hair to flutter.

A sharp pain roamed about Koremitsu’s bare elbow; Tsuyako was grabbing onto it, ostensibly telling him that she would not let him go. She continued to hold onto Koremitsu’s arm tightly in both hands, and leaned her tender body upon him.

There was the scent of a monastery, the scent of poppy seeds added to the fire, the alluring fragrance whiffing past his nose.

Tsuyako’s shoulders were quaking in fear.

But her eyes were still looking up at him hazily.

“Tsuyako is not being her usual self. It is strange, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru’s face too was filled with an apprehensive, confused look.

“Senpai, are you feeling unwell? Let’s find a place to rest–“

There was sweat trickling down Koremitsu’s back as he said this to Tsuyako.

At this moment, the cellphone rang shrilly in his pocket.

There was no doubt it was Aoi.

But Tsuyako continued to grab Koremitsu with her fingers, not allowing him to pick up the call. As he had forgotten to put his phone to silent mode, the shrill ringtone continued to ring.

“Please do not leave. Stay here.”

Tsuyako continued to repeat this, panting over and over again.

“If you are not around, that woman will capture me. I will be ensnared by the spider web, unable to breathe and dance.”

(Who is that woman!?)

Koremitsu frowned, his heart pounding. Hikaru watched on with bated breath as the moonlight shone on his back.

Tsuyako buried her face at Koremitsu’s neck. The fragrance from the kimono gave off an alluring scent, and the shadows rained upon the scattered flowers. The wind blew the clouds, which slowly covered the moonlight.

Her body was quivering, her eyes widened slightly, showing a lunatic looking frenzy, ostensibly terrified of that sight.

“No…if the spider covers the moon–that woman will appear–“

◇ ◇ ◇

(Where is Akagi?)

Honoka, dressed in a waiter outfit, was serving the champagne glasses from the tray.

Hiina, dressed in a similar outfit was showing a passionate smile as she did the same.

—
Do you want to do some part-time work?

She received this call from Hiina the previous evening. “I will be working as a waitress for a party, but I heard that Mr Akagi and Her Highness Aoi will be attending it too.” Upon hearing that reply, Honoka hesitated, “I-I just happened to be free on that day.” Honoka replied.

(Aren’t I being like a stalker here!? What do I say if I meet Akagi!?)

Honoka was left frustrated, her gut cramping in pain. Beside her, Hiina taunted, saying,

“It is great that you are able to come, Miss Shikibu. We were short on hands in the first place, and though it is supposed to be a private internal party, the invited guests are all extremely rich. You can try knowing a few of them if you have a fancy to them! Ah, I think you only have eyes for Mr Akagi however.”

“Th-That’s not the case.”

“In that case, don’t worry. I heard of some rumors that Her Highness Aoi will be revealing her lover at tonight’s party.”

Hiina whispered as she glanced up at Honoka with a boyish look.

Honoka felt her breathing cease.

“Ah, I found Her Highness Aoi.”

“!”

Aoi was standing on the other side of the guests mingling around elegantly, dressed in a bright blue, long-sleeved kimono with large white flower patterns, full of summer flair. Honoka’s heart shrank the moment she saw the former.

Aoi’s hair was tied in a bun, decorated with a larger white ribbon, making her prettier and cuter than she normally was.

Honoka was dressed as a waiter, and she was dressed as a Princess, a guest-of-honor; they were of completely different levels, to a point of no comparison right from the beginning.

(Her Highness Aoi wants to declare Akagi as a her boyfriend…that has to be a joke, right? Since when have things developed to that extent?)

An intense throbbing bellowed from her chest.

Aoi was looking around frantically, seemingly looking around. She lowered her head uneasily from time to time, took out her cellphone, and stared at the screen.

“Eh? Isn’t Her Highness Aoi being a little strange now?”

Hiina narrowed her eyes sharply.

Aoi fidgeted as she pressed the buttons, and placed the phone at her ear. The expression gradually became gloomier.

(She’s calling Akagi now, right?)

◇ ◇ ◇

(Why is Mr Akagi not picking up the phone?)

She dialled on the cellphone, only to be cut off by the voicemail.

As a result, she was more anxious than usual.

Normally, Asai would be right beside her whenever they had a party; Aoi had chosen to invite Koremitsu on such a day as Asai could not make it.

However, that Koremitsu was nowhere to be seen.

On the way back home the previous day, “I will give you a call if I cannot find you. Please make sure your cellphone is sufficiently charged.” Aoi had requested Koremitsu this, “Got it.” and the latter could only answer sheepishly.

(I do not think he is not around here. If he is not, he will definitely contact me. Did something happen?)

Koremitsu’s red hair should be extremely eye-catching amongst the crowds.

She really wanted to meet him as soon as possible, or she would be extremely uneasy.

She kept her cellphone, and again walked off, seeking Koremitsu. Her uncles approached her with smiles on their faces.

“Oh? Are you alone, Aoi? This is the day where you introduce your boyfriend to us. I am looking forward to me.”

“I too want to know. Where is he? You managed to hide his identity from Asai too. Well, we understand about that too. I’ll support you two wholeheartedly if he is a man that matches you.”

Aoi was troubled.

Everyone was amicable to her, and had doted on her ever since her infancy. However, if she could not find Koremitsu, she would not be able to introduce him to them, and if she were to explain matters, they would be worried, wondering if she was in a successful relationship with him, their impression of him foul as a result.
Aoi should be with the person I chose after all,
this might be the opinion in the end.

(What do I do?)

Aoi did not know how she should deal with them in such a situation, for Asai had been handling everything right from the beginning.

Asai however was not present, and certainly, she would not help as she obviously despised Koremitsu utterly.

“Erm…he will be…a little late.”

Aoi explained with a gradually softening voice, and her guardians surrounding her immediatel frowned.

“He is late? This cannot do. There is no way he should make you wait, Aoi.”

“I can’t allow for a man who leaves Aoi alone. I think you should at least meet the man I talked about for courtship, Aoi.”

“Well, if that’s the case, my wife’s nephew is a fine youth himself.”

“No no, I have a fine man amongst my subordinates well suited for her.”

They continued to speak to Aoi with gentle tones, and the girl was nearly defeated by such gentle words and smiles.

She felt her legs weaken, her palms sweaty.

She did not know how to give them an acceptable answer.

(But if this is to keep up, I will have to be courted away.)

In such a case, Aoi expect the topic to end up being about her being betrothed, even if she stated her displeasure for it.

(I do not want that to happen. I still like Hikaru; I do not want others to take the place Hikaru once took.)

It should not be something that could be taken easily.

She could still remember his dazzling smile and rich, sweet voice. She could never forget the final gift Hikaru gave her.

The gentle stars that fell whilst sparkling.

Hikaru had said before “I really love Miss Aoi from the bottom of my heart.”

And Aoi really loved Hikaru for expressing his true, honest feelings to her.

If–just if–there was anyone who could replace him, it would be Hikaru’s friend, who did his best delivering Hikaru’s presents.This savage-looking friend of Hikaru who was soft at heart–

“I-I do not–“

I do not want to be betrothed.
Just when Aoi summoned all her courage and tried to utter those words.

“Aoi here is still dating me.”

A gentle voice rang behind Aoi.

For an instance, Aoi had assumed that Hikaru had revived. That lush, sweet voice caused her heart to shiver.

He placed a hand gently on her shoulder to comfort her.

Her uncles widened their eyes in shock.

A slender bespectacled youth was standing there, looking extremely sorry.

He was dressed in a posh suit, but his shoulders were skinny, he lacked authoritative charisma, and seemed somewhat unreliable.

“I-It-it’s you–? No, but.”

The uncles, and even Aoi, showed bewilderment on their faces.

“Please continue to keep this a secret from the rest, especially to my mother and Asai.”

Kazuaki Mikado chimed in as he lowered his eyebrows, showing a feeble look. He then turned to Aoi, and showed a naive smile.

“Let us go, Aoi.”

♢ ♢ ♢

“Let’s follow them.”

Hiina quickly moved off in the direction Aoi and the bespectacled youth went off to.

“Eh, wa-wait–Oumi!”

Honoka panicked, and hurried off after her as well.

Kazuaki continued to embrace Aoi’s shoulder in a gentlemanly manner. It seemed he tried to nonchalantly pry her away from her uncles.

Aoi’s eyes were completely blank.

“M-Mr Kazuaki. What you just said was,”

“Sorry.”

Kazuaki lowered his head,

“I saw that you were in some trouble, so I could only say such a thing. I think you will be really troubled to be mistaken for dating a foolish, airheaded person like me. Well, I really am sorry about that.”

His forehead was full of sweat, and the eyes beneath the glasses look panicky as he lowered his head a few times, apologizing to Aoi profusely. This caused Aoi to feel guilty as well.

“No, you really helped me out there. Please lift your head. Thank you for your well intentions. Erm, actually…”

“Ah, yes, I understand. I did not mean that when I say dating. I will explain this to everyone when I do find the time. Even I will be in trouble if mother is to hear about it.”

He shuddered slightly, probably recalling his mother who was deemed an iron lady,

“Erm, if mother is to say something to you, please explain to her that I am not in such a relationship with you, Aoi.”

It seemed he was really terrified of his own mother.

He continued to lower his head as he walked on, his legs failing him.

“Woah!”

He shrieked as he tripped.

“Are you alright?”

“Ahh…it seems I have twisted my ankle. Mother is going to tell me off with something like ‘You fell because you do not have enough concentration’.”

Kazuaki put on his spectacles, which had dropped off, and lowered his eyebrows pitifully. His eyes were moist with tears, probably due to the pain, and he hobbled on like that.

“Erm, let me help you.”

“Sorry about that, Aoi.”

“There is a bench there. Have a seat first.”

“Okay.”

The situation had been completely reversed, as Aoi supported Kazuaki towards the bench.

(Is this person really Hikaru’s older brother…?)

They were alike only in the slenderness of their bodies and the gentleness of their voices; everything else was different.

The adults had said that Hikaru was often dazzling, shrouded in glory, and in comparison, while Kazuaki was a good person, he was overly bland.

Hikaru and Kazuaki did not share the same mothers.

Their father had admitted to the child of his mistress, Hikaru, and as the proper wife, Kazuaki was completely incensed and frenzied by this, bringing Kazuaki back to her ancestral home as a result.

Even so, the fact remained that both of them were brothers.

Aoi felt incredulous that she was helped out by Hikaru’s brother, but at the same time, she recalled that he was Tsuyako’s fiance, and a clout of darkness shrouded her heart.

(It is true that Mr Kazuaki has an ordinary appearance and personality, and he may seem reliable, but he is a nice, gentle adult. For him to be betrayed like this

is really…)

She could not bring herself to like Tsuyako after all.

And just when she was wondering that,

“…Eh…? Tsuyako?”

Kazuaki muttered blankly, as if he had just seen a ghost.

The moon was hidden amidst the clouds, and under such a dimness, the radiant red hair swayed with the wind amidst the scattered red petals.

A feminine body with voluptuous curves was dressed in a long-sleeved kimono, shrouded in red flowers too venomous for the summer, the alluring charm unable to be contained.

The sash was partially loosened, her hair swaying together with the wind.

Tsuyako was not alone.

She was embracing someone in front of the Crape Myrtle.

And Aoi was shocked when she realize Tsuyako was tightly embracing Koremitsu.

Koremitsu’s red hair was overlapping Tsuyako’s own, the tense tender hands were on her back and waist.

Tsuyako had her back facing Aoi, and Koremitsu was facing them.

Once he noticed a dumbfounded Aoi, Koremitsu widened his eyes.

(Why is Mr Akagi…embracing Miss Tsuyako?)

Aoi’s limbs seemed petrified into stone, unable to move.

The entity she did not want to see was right in front of her, yet it seemed she had forgotten how to blink.

She wanted to turn and run away immediately!

(Why am I unable to move!?)

(Why is Aoi here!? Who’s with her!?)

Koremitsu felt the blood drained from his body.

Tsuyako continued to latch to him, and while he tried his best to calm her down, Aoi suddenly appeared in front of him.

She was the one person he could not show such a terrible scene to!

The bespectacled man Aoi carried along was standing there, his face tensed.

“Miss Aoi…Mr Kazuaki.”

Hikaru muttered, his eyes widened as he remained speechless.

(Anyway, got to say something to Aoi! She’s definitely mistaking my relationship with sempai here!)

Aoi remained still, her wide teary eyes showing an endless amount of anguish, a heartbreaking sight to any witness. Koremitsu too understood thoroughly how much he had hurt her, the flesh on his body ostensibly scraped away.

Got to settle this misunderstanding quickly!

Koremitsu opened his mouth, wanting to say something.

At that moment, Tsuyako placed her hands on Koremitsu’s cheeks.

During dance practice, her hands were warm whenever she touched him. This time however, the palms holding onto his face was chillingly cold.

“Tsuyako!”

Hikaru exclaimed.

(They’re cold.)

Just when Koremitsu thought about this, the ice was pressing upon his lips.

Tsuyako’s lips were covering Koremitsu’s.

Right in front of Aoi–

(You got to be kidding! Akagi!?)

Honoka, remaining hidden in the bushes, felt a piercing shock through her heart as she clutched at her chest.

(Akagi just kissed Upperclassman Tsuyako!)

As for Koremitsu–

He too looked confounded, unable to comprehend immediately what was happening to him.

A soft, icy object was pressed upon his lips, and the alluring fragrance of burning poppy seeds spread about, agitating his nose and skin.

Hikaru’s face was contorted. The scenery depicted in Koremitsu’s eyes seemed to become as hazy as the dimmed moon.

The only thing he could see was Aoi, the latter looking angry, yet about to burst into tears–an expression of wanting to lash out.

(What’s the matter with you, sempai!? Why are you doing such a cruel thing!?)

Koremitsu screamed in his heart, but his body was unable to move, ostensibly bound by a spider web. While Koremitsu’s lips were trembling, Tsuyako never let hers leave his for a long time.

Chapter 5

The following Monday.

The third year, Shungo Tōjō, brought his lunchbox to Koremitsu’s classroom during lunch break.

“Come out. You know the reason.”

Looking at his frowning face and stern expression, one could definitely tell that he was not looking for Koremitsu just to have lunch.

It was the time of the season where the summer heat truly starts to exert itself, but the shrubs in the school garden was as cool as ever. Two men were sitting on the rocks surrounding the stone tablets, eating from their lunch boxes. Hikaru too was seated on one of the rocks, watching the duo nervously.

Tōjō spoke up,

“Why did Aoi not ask me for help? Asking you to act as her boyfriend is a grave mistake, and we ended up having to get that foolish young master Kazuaki for help. Argh, why was I at a study meeting when Aoi secretly took action without Asai knowing.”

Tōjō brought the lunchbox to his lips, the delicately made contents rich in color and balanced in nutrition. He scooped the food skillfully with his chopsticks while

he uttered regretfully.

And then, he glared at Koremitsu and lambasted him,

“You were being too sloppy, Akagi. Since you agreed to act as her boyfriend, how can you let yourself fool around with Tsuyako? Do you not know about what happened to Hikaru?”

(How in the world does this guy know so much? It’s like he saw it for himself.)

Koremitsu pondered, and answered,

“…I know.”

He answered coldly, and Tōjō’s frown deepened when he heared that.

“You should have known how shocked Aoi would have been right? That fiance of hers had been fooling around with other women, and she finally managed to steady herself after he died. Now a mistress of that scum of a fiance is trying to hook up with the one Aoi has feelings for–no, I would say it is about trusting that person rather than having feelings for, nothing else at all–anyway, Aoi has been distrustful of other men because of that foolhardy casanova of a fiance. Now the person she miraculously trusts is fooling around with that foolish fiance’s mistress, and Aoi so happened to witness the entire scene.”

In the face of Tōjō's merciless verbal beatdown, Hikaru clutched his chest in anguish.

"Mr Shungo always had a very bad opinion of me. If I recall correctly, he has been aloof to me since young, though I do not really expect him to like me..."

Koremitsu too remained speechless.

"Aoi has been so dejected, it was pitiful. Yesterday, she was holding that fat cat, hiding inside the room, and unwilling to come out. Maybe one day she will say that she will bring that cat with metabolic syndrome out and be a nun."

"Mr Shungo also hates Miss Aoi's cat...however, Miss Aoi may really say such things as she is overly pure."

Hikaru noted worriedly.

Koremitsu felt his gut wince.

He sent Aoi a few calls, and even a few mails, that Saturday evening. She never picked up the calls however, and never replied to the messages.

On this day, he immediately went to Aoi's classroom the moment he got to school. Asai however was right beside Aoi, her arm wrapped around Aoi's shoulder, preventing Koremitsu from entering.

Even so, Koremitsu shouted at her,

“Aoi!”

Aoi lowered her head with a stiff expression, and Asai approached him, saying with a condescending look.

“Aoi does not wish to speak to you. Do not show your filthy face to her again.”

During that time, Aoi never turned to look at him again, remaining still as she cringed her shoulders.

(Damn it, I know it’s my fault this time, but I can’t stand being ignored by Aoi with such a painful look…)

“What in the world was that Tsuyako thinking? She caused quite some trouble with Hikaru back then. The women of the Udates, including ‘that one’ are all hard to deal with. Seriously, why did she do such a brazen act in front of everyone else? Is it because of the spider blood?”

(Spider blood…?)

Koremitsu remembered Tsuyako mention something about the spider, a chill gripped his heart.

“What has sempai got to do with the spider blood?”

He asked.Tōjō seemed hesitant, apparently choosing his words carefully before talking.

“It is said that the Udates’ women are all descendants of a spider, that they have a very strong possessive urge, extremely obsessive.”

Koremitsu inadvertently looked down at the arm Tsuyako grabbed; the scratch marks were still on it, and his skin felt an urge.

(Possessiveness…)

“No.”

Hikaru suddenly spoke adamantly.

Koremitsu turned around, and found Hikaru to be staring at Tōjō sternly.

“Tsuyako never showed any signs of possessiveness towards me, and she never showed any obsession..”

Hikaru narrowed his eyes, giving the harshest tone and expression he ever showed at Tōjō, causing Koremitsu to be taken aback.

Tōjō, unable to hear any of Hikaru's words, continued on while frowning,

"I suppose this incident was meant to frustrate Aoi. Tsuyako has always been like this."

"You do not understand Tsuyako at all! She definitely is not someone who would deliberately bully others like that!"

"Ever since she came back from Japan, she has been much flashier in showing off."

"But Tsuyako always attracts lots of attention because she is really pretty! What is wrong with flaunting her beauty?"

"Even if I do ignore the thing about Aoi, I would advise you not to be so close with Tsuyako. The Udate women are all like a time bomb; even if she tries to woo you, you must not fall for her. She is the descendant of a spider that wrecks men."

"Those men were the ones who fell for Tsuyako's charms. It is not Tsuyako's fault! Besides, this thing about being the descendant of a spider, is that not just some outdated ancient myth from a thousand years ago?"

Hikaru continued to unleash wave after wave of vehement protests.

(Can you please don’t argue over my head like this, you guys!?)

“You need to be careful with choosing the woman to go out with, or are you a fool who accepts all comers like Hikaru”

“What is the matter now? Are you not being so picky even though you are still a virgin, Mr Shungo?”

(Calm down here, Hikaru! Don’t reveal other people’s private information like that! That has nothing to do with being a virgin or not!)

Koremitsu beseeched in his heart, but of course, Hikaru could not possibly hear it. Even if Koremitsu wanted to grab Hikaru by the shoulder and stop him, his arm would only pass through him.

On the right side was Tōjō, insisting that he dissociate himself from Tsuyako, and on the left was Hikaru shouting,
“Tsuyako definitely has a reason for doing that! It is not to make Miss Aoi unhappy! Tsuyako is like the red weeping cherry blossoms, proud and regal!”

(Ah, seriously!)

Koremitsu gritted his teeth, and exclaimed,

“I don’t care about Hikaru and me, but stop pointing the blame on sempai!”

Tōjō’s eyebrows twitched slightly.

“I do blame myself for being too careless to let that sort of thing happen in front of Aoi, and I really feel apologetic for that. Like Hikaru said however, sempai isn’t that sort of woman who would deliberately do such annoying things.”

Tōjō frowned hard, his stare harsh. Koremitsu however glared back, and concluded,

“I’ll ask sempai as to why she did such a thing, and I won’t let the same thing happen again.”

Is that enough now, Hikaru?

“At least say something to defend me, please?”

Hikaru continued to puff his cheeks, but Koremitsu ignored him.

Tōjō gave a distasteful look, and said,

“This is depressing…I thought you would be a more reasonable man than Hikaru.”

He sighed, gave a stoic, unemotional look, and declared,

“If you are going to continue getting along with Tsuyako, do not ever approach Aoi again.”

He took his lunchbox wrapping and left for the school building. Koremitsu gave a bitter look, and grumbled,

“Argh, now on top of Saiga, even Tōjō has his eyes on me. I can’t approach Aoi like this.”

“Mr Shungo is too inflexible. I really have to thank you though, Koremitsu, for rebuffing him about Tsuyako.”

“I got no choice. You’re the one yapping beside me. Besides…she’s still my sempai.”

Koremitsu believed that Tsuyako was not a woman who would kiss someone else just to annoy Aoi; he had the same feeling as Hikaru.

He was concerned about Aoi, but first, he had to solve the situation regarding Tsuyako.

“And then? What’s the thing about the spider?”

“Sorry. I am not certain about it.”

“Huh?”

Koremitsu stared back.

Didn’t you argue to Tōjō that it’s a myth from 1000 years ago or something?

Hikaru curled his lips,

“There is a shrine worshipping the spider in the Udates’ main house. It was said that during the Heian Era, a deceased Udate woman became a spider, but it was a taboo to reveal it openly back then. As far as I know however, the Udates all hate spider. I feel that regarding the spider, Tsuyako…seems afraid of it rather than despise it. She would tremble with a pale look even though there was only a little spider crawling by.”

–if the spider covers the moon–that woman will appear–

Tsuyako murmured in anguish as her eyes showed a hazy expression akin to that of the hazy moon.

At that time, it seemed Tsuyako was a completely different person…

“Damn it. Time to get back to class. We’ll talk about this later.”

Koremitsu walked off with an anxious feeling, and at that time,

He found Honoka standing in front of the tall green bamboos.

“Ack, Shikibu–“

Honoka pouted her lips slightly, her eyes filled with firmness and weakness as she stared back at him.

(Damn it, when did she come here? Did she hear me talk to Hikaru? In that case, am I some dangerous guy who’s talking to myself here?)

Koremitsu panicked, and Honoka said something that shocked him more,

“I was there, that Saturday night.”

“There, as in…”

“The garden party.”

“!”

“Working as a part-time waiter there.”

Koremitsu’s mind was drained of blood at that instant.

Hikaru too widened his eyes in shock.

Honoka continued to pout as she mumbled in a dry, monotonous tone,

“You and upperclassman Tsuyako.”

“Hey!”

“Embraced each other.”

“Wait!”

“And kissed each other.”

“~~~~~~~~~~!!”

Honoka raised her eyebrows harshly.

(That usual thing’s coming!)

Koremitsu instinctively exerted strength at his chest.

But no matter how he waited, the killer kick never came.

What replaced it was a feeble fist touching his chest, devoid of any strength.

“…Idiot.”

A completely lifeless voice rang at his ears.

And another fist tapped upon his chest–

“Idiot, idiot…idiot.”

For every ‘idiot’ Honoka said, there was a weak fist hitting her. Her head was lowered, and the light blond hair was draped over her face, covering her expression as she continued hitting him.

The fists tapping him were weaker than the instance Shioriko slammed at his chest–however, Koremitsu seemingly felt the impacts striking his heart directly.

Honoka’s shoulders were trembling.

Koremitsu grabbed her slender wrist hesitantly, and she lifted her head.

“!”

Koremitsu’s breathing practically ceased once he saw her crying look.

Those feisty eyes were filled with clear water, tracing her cheeks in the form of teardrops.

Honoka kept gritting her teeth, staring at Koremitsu furiously.

She moved her lips, wanting to say something. However, it seemed she could not let out a single sound as she choked and sobbed a few times. Whenever that happened, she would lower her eyebrows, her eyes teary; in the end, she shook his hand away, seemingly unable to endure this situation any further as she said again,

“Idiot.”

And so, she ran off.

Koremitsu widened his eyes, watching the slender legs and back depart away gradually.

He exhaled slightly.

He took a short breath again, and exhaled again.

But in the end, his breathing could not be reverted back to normal.

His heart was pounding like crazy.

“Th-that shocked me.”

Koremitsu still had his eyes widened as he muttered from deep within his heart.

He was really, really, really shocked by that!

(She actually showed such an expression.)

Koremitsu was really inept at dealing with crying women.

When he was in elementary school, his mother abandoned him and ran away from home, sobbing and saying ‘Sorry’ over and over again.

Whenever he saw a crying woman, Koremitsu would feel his chest tighten, suffocating him.

But when he saw Honoka’s sobbing face, due to his shock, his heart pounded wildly before he could feel anguish.

“Hikaru, you said that women….”

Koremitsu was about to speak up, only to stop afterwards.

“? Koremitsu?”

“…It’s nothing.”

The bell indicating the end of noon break ran amidst the refreshingly hot summer wind. Koremitsu sprinted to the classroom.

(So women…can show expressions completely different from before.)

—

DID YOU FORGET THAT I SAID I LIKED YOU?

Honoka screamed that in the midst of the classroom, her cheeks puffed.

(…As if.)

Koremitsu gritted his teeth, murmuring in his heart.

(How can I forget that, you idiot.)

And beside him, Hikaru showed a tender, anguished expression befitting an adult.

♢ ♢ ♢

Honoka never once glanced at Koremitsu during the entire 5th period. She had her head lowered as she held the cellphone tightly under the table. Even so, her shoulders would twitch slightly whenever Koremitsu fidgeted or dragged his chair about slightly.

Koremitsu too was conscious of Honoka’s reactions, causing his back and neck to stiffen.

(If sempai’s problem can be settled, I’ll ask Shikibu if she wants to go to the pool.)

There’s a chance that I’ll be rejected…but I have to ask her at least.)

(But first, I need to know why sempai did that. Got to be sure about that.)

Koremitsu intended to head to the roof and plan out his actions with Hikaru as he went out of the classroom. At this moment,

“Mr Akagi! This is bad!”

Hiina Oumi of the newspaper club came running over, her large breasts bouncing.

“Her Highness Aoi is hurt! She’s sent to the infirmary!”

“What did you say?”

♢ ♢ ♢

By the time Koremitsu and Hikaru rushed over to the infirmary, Aoi was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey, what happened to Aoi!”

“Where is Miss Aoi?”

Koremitsu raised his eyebrows as he panted, and after asking the infirmary teacher, learnt that Aoi merely had an abrasion on her feet, causing them to be dumbfounded.

The young infirmary teacher tentatively said that Aoi’s class had P.E. for their 5th period, and after returning from the sports hall, she changed from her sneakers into the indoors shoes. She was injured due to a ceramic fragment inside the shoes.

“Damn it. Why’s that Oumi exaggerating things like this!?”

Koremitsu cussed on the corridor.

“But it really is dastardly to place a ceramic fragment in a shoe. Who did it? Miss Aoi has been bullied like this a few times before…even if she tries to act tough, she must have been really hurt inside.”

Hikaru looked furious as he said worriedly.

“Yeah. It’s unforgivable to do something like this to someone else’s shoe.”

Koremitsu went over to Aoi’s classroom to have a look, and found that she had retired for the day. It seemed Asai too did the same, probably to send Aoi to the

hospital for added precaution.

(Isn’t she being too overprotective over Aoi?)

Both Asai and Tōjō would become overprotective when it came to Aoi. Hikaru too was the same in that aspect.

“Koremitsu, do you mind heading to the entrance? They probably would call for a car; perhaps Miss Aoi has yet to leave.”

Hikaru pleaded, probably unable to relax if he could not be sure of her safety.

Aoi looked frail, white, and had a pure and innocent personality. One would definitely worry over her safety, hoping that she would not be hurt. Koremitsu himself understood this feeling.

He quickly changed his shoes at the entrance, and found Aoi and Asai standing at the main gate.

He hid behind a tree to avoid Asai’s detection, and slowly approached them. Aoi lowered her head dejectedly, while Asai stood beside her with a stoic look.

Hikaru’s expression too became gloomy, probably because Aoi was too downhearted.

At this moment, a vehicle arrived, stopping in front of them.

Koremitsu had assumed it would be a black Benz, but unexpectedly, it was a refreshing blue colored call. Koremitsu could not tell what brand it was, but it seemed casually cute.

A bespectacled, skinny youth was seated at the driver seat, looking very happy as he chatted with Aoi and Asai cheerfully.

“That guy…”

Koremitsu narrowed his eyes sharply.

It was the person who was with Aoi at the garden party.

“Mr Kazuaki…”

Hikaru murmured in shock.

“You know that guy? I remember you did call his name at the garden party too. Who is he? Why’s he here to pick up Aoi?”

Hikaru answered with a hazy, hollow expression,

“That person is my older brother. He is the child of my father’s actual wife, and I am the child of the mistress.”

“What?”

He inadvertently shouted.

Aoi probably could not hear that voice clearly, but right when she was about to get on the car, she suddenly stopped, and looked back.

She stared over at Koremitsu’s direction with a downhearted, feeble expression, seemingly looking for someone.

Upon seeing her being in such a mood, Koremitsu felt gloomy, as if his heart is being pinched.

If not for Asai’s presence, he would have gone up immediately and apologized to her for what happened during the garden party.

Aoi got on the car as she turned back with a gloomy look.

(…Sorry about that, Aoi.)

Koremitsu watched her leave in agony.

At this moment, he smelled upon a scent.

It was a thick, rich sweetness, the aroma of putting the sacrifices into a fire when praying at a monastery…

Koremitsu felt a chilly presence on his back, and turned back abruptly.

Just like that night at the garden party, Tsuyako was standing right there.

He felt his hairs stand.

Hikaru too gasped in shock.

Tsuyako was not looking at Koremitsu.

She was staring intently at the direction where Aoi and the rest had departed, her eyes as hazy as the shrouded moon.

The hem of her skirt was messy, her short-sleeved blouse crumpled, three of her buttons were unbuttoned.

Also, her breasts were completely drenched, her underwear could vaguely be seen, and the wet areas of her skirt were showing a black color.

Her red hair was ruffled, draped upon her pale face like blood trails.

Engraved in Koremitsu’s eyes was a living demon with supernatural beauty and alluring charm that would befuddle his heart.

The red hair swayed in the stale wind.

With her back turned to him, Tsuyako walked away.

She was stumbling, struggling with her limbs as if they are gagged together, unlike her usual perchance of taking light strides, dancing with a fan in hand.

“Sempai!”

Koremitsu called for her, but she never looked back.

“Koremitsu, after her!”

“Right!”

The bell indicating the 6th period had rung, but Tsuyako continued to the courtyard instead of the classroom.

With the sweltering summer sun above, the red hair rustled dryly.

“Wait, sempai!”

(Damn it, this is becoming just like the garden party. What’s the matter with you, sempai?)

Koremitsu clearly recalled the unnatural coldness from her hands when his face was brought to her, and the coldness of the lips that came at him. These caused a chill on his back.

–Do not go to Miss Aoi
.

— I will ‘prune’ flowers like her if you do so otherwise.

Like under the alluring hazy moon, Tsuyako’s red hair swayed under the blazing summer heat, her gloomy expression watching Koremitsu.

(Don’t tell me that the one who put the ceramic fragment in Aoi’s indoor shoes–)

Hikaru had repeated over and over again that Tsuyako was not this sort of person; Koremitsu too believed in that.

But if it were this Tsuyako–

–If you are not around, that woman will capture me.

–I will be ensnared by the spider web, unable to breathe and dance.

Her fingertips were clawed deep into his flesh, seemingly ripping his arm apart.

That voice was filled with dread.

(Who's that woman? Is she the one commanding sempai? Where's that woman exactly?)

Hikaru, following by sight, looked solemnly at Tsuyako's back.

Koremitsu's palms were sweaty.

Tsuyako did not stop as she went around the school campus, arriving at the courtyard.

Suddenly, Hikaru remained still, seemingly jolted by a major shock.

Koremitsu too gasped as he looked over at the courtyard.

And then, he heard Hikaru’s astonished voice,

“The flowers…have fallen.”

There were the Orange Chinese Trumpet Bells, thin red Oleanders, the white Hibiscus with red tints in the middle.

These flowers Hikaru had praised with exuberance were ripped off pitifully, their remains scattered on the dirt and lawn.

Some of the flowers were crushed, some were trampled in the mud, and they were all scattered everywhere.

There were still flowers on the tree crowns, but only branches were left at the bottom. The green vines of the Orange Chinese Trumpet Bells swayed in a razed state with the wind, like a wrecked swing.

It was practically a scene of fallen flower remains.

The red-haired Tsuyako was in the midst of such remains, her back facing Koremitsu’s group.

Her disheveled hair let out an alluring beautiful, her straightened back showing incomparable dignity. However, her tightly clenched fists were trembling, and

upon seeing that, Koremitsu called out tentatively,

“Sempai…”

Tsuyako looked back, giving a relatively normal look, a helpless girl lacking vitality. Upon seeing this, Koremitsu relaxed slightly, and clumsily asked,

“Classes have started. You’re skipping them?”

Her eyes were filled with trepidation as she stared at Koremitsu.

“…Mr Akagi…you are not going to class either…?”

Tsuyako whispered back.

“I’ll do so if you return back to class.”

“…How cheeky of you.”

Tsuyako curled her lips, but was unable to smile even though she wanted to, the voice stuck in her throat as she hoarsely replied in a pitiful manner.

“That thing I did…that night…I do apologize for that. Is that your first time, Mr Akagi?”

“…No.”

Koremitsu answered with a scowl, and Tsuyako lowered her eyebrows, seemingly relieved.

“Really? That’s good.”

She muttered.

“If it was your first kiss, you would have been left with a bad memory. It would have been a pity…”

Tsuyako’s pained tone and expression seemed to indicate that she was really sorry about it.

“What happened to me doesn’t matter. Since I’m a guy…I’ll just think of it as an accident and forget about it. Anyway, instead of that, you should be apologizing to Aoi.”

Tsuyako lowered her eyelids.

“…”

“Sempai, why did you do such a thing?”

“…”

She curled her lips in melancholy, not answering at all.

Worried, Hikaru placed his hand on Tsuyako’s shoulder, and brought his face to her cheek.

After some silence, Tsuyako turned her back on Koremitsu, seemingly wanting to escape from him as she reached for the Oleanders. The white, silky hand stroked the red petals, the shoulders trembling

“The flowers…have fallen off.”

The anguished voice sounded heartbroken.

The flowers fallen at Tsuyakos feet rustled on the grass.

“Hikaru…really likes the flowers. No, it was beyond that; he really loved each and every flower with all his heart…it is the same with the flowers in this courtyard…he has been taking care of them lovingly, very happily…’The first Hibiscus is budding flowers’, the Purslanes are a little unenthusiastic, let us

provide some shade for it' 'The Teddy Bear flowers are finally starting to bloom. They are a species of sunflowers, their petals as fluffy as a bear's furs…"

Koremitsu could not see Tsuyako's expression

But her words were filled with a tinge of sadness, causing his heart to inadvertently tighten upon hearing.

Hikaru too watched Tsuyako's slender shoulders in melancholy with his beautiful eyes.

If Hikaru were still alive, he would have embraced Tsuyako at this instance; he however was a ghost, and could no longer water the flowers, build a shelter, and comfort a lover.

"…Hikaru took care of me the same way he took care of the flowers. I really hated my hair before I met Hikaru…I always cut my hair into a bob, trying my best to look unimpressive as I could…I did not dare to express my views back then, and always had my head lowered…I really did not want to study in a boarding school in England when my family demanded that I do so, yet I did not dare to refuse…"

Her feeble intermittent voice rang so hollowly in Koremitsu's ear.

The melancholy in Hikaru's eyes was started to worsen.

“…After staying in the boarding school, I was still feeling self-abased…the girls around me were all very dazzling, cute, looking very happy, but I am neither pretty nor cute…I was so pessimistic thinking that I was different from everyone else..when I hear others talk about love, I would cringe back in pity, because I knew such a fantastical thing could never happen to me…”

Koremitsu could not understand why Tsuyako was so lacking in self-esteem when she was in England.

The Tsuyako at this point was so beautiful and alluring even Honoka was envious of her looks. She was even hailed by everyone as the red dancing princess.

She actually had such an inferiority complex?

Koremitsu could not believe it at all.

“Back then, I always felt that I was a brat with rusty colored hair, that nobody would care about me. However, I met Hikaru.”

Tsuyako’s gloomy voice was mixed in with a tinge of delight.

Hikaru too was probably reminiscing of the past, his eyes filled with tenderness and anguish.

“It was during Spring, when I was 14, and I returned to Japan. There just so happened to be this garden party…it was dark…I did not want to feel neglected amongst the clouds, so I went to a place with few people. I saw a sakura tree that had yet to bloom, and felt that it was just like me…just like that, I lifted my head, and Hikaru walked out from behind that tree, basked under the gentle moonlight…”

When she saw this moon spirit-like pretty boy, she was so shocked her heart nearly ceased. “What were you doing?” she asked, “Viewing flowers.” and Hikaru answered.

–There are no flowers here.

–They will soon bloom. The branch here will cause the most beautiful sakura flowers to bloom. Ah, how beautiful they are. I am looking forward to it.

And then, Hikaru pointed his index finger at Tsuyako’s unimpressive red bob hair, saying innocently.

–Your hair certainly is a beautiful red. If you leave it long, it will definitely resemble the red weeping cherry blossoms. I am looking forward to it.

Hikaru narrowed his eyes in an intoxicated manner, ostensibly watching a certain piece of expensive item.

Nobody had looked at Tsuyako with such an expression before.

Nobody had praised the rust-colored hair she had an inferiority complex over, saying that it was like a red weeping cherry blossom.

“Because of the words Hikaru said, I became the red dancing princess.”

On the night before she returned to England.

Hikaru suddenly visited the Udates, to her surprise. He snuck in during the middle of the night, with everyone else oblivious.

Tsuyako frantically pulled Hikaru into her room.

What are you going to do if my father or anyone else spotted you?
Tsuyako was very anxious, and Hikaru smiled at her gently, saying, “It is alright”.

–Why are you able to remain so calm? You just did something unbelievable. Are you not scared of that?

–I am not. I am someone who will be forgiven no matter what I do.

He said serenely.

The doubt, fear in Tsuyako’s heart seemingly melted away.

She could boldly entrust her all to Hikaru.

I definitely can change.

Tsuyako had this thought, and believed it.

“I dreamily fell in love with Hikaru, and he even visited me in England. When I found him sneaking around the dormitories, my heart was racing, thinking that I could do such a bold thing. I left my hair long, my teacher applauded my dancing, and I was really happy every single day…after transferring back to Japan, I could see Hikaru any day I wanted, so no matter how anyone criticized or spite me, I never cared about it. I was basically drowning in an eternal party… however, Hikaru seemed really fragile when I met him at the villa during the Golden Week this year….”

Tsuyako’s voice broke up.

The tattered petals were quivering on the floor.

Tsuyako’s back never showed any movement.

“Hikaru probably committed suicide.”

She suddenly whispered these words, and Koremitsu gasped in shock. In the meantime, Hikaru’s face lost all emotion.

“Because, there were slash marks on his wrists.”

These words caused Koremitsu’s heart to pound wildly, and he inadvertetly turned to Hikaru’s hands.

The white slender arms were reaching out from the summer uniform shirt.

The crystalline skin never had any marks or moles, and the two wrists showed nary a scar.

(But Hikaru’s a ghost…I can’t possibly be seeing the same body as the one when he was still alive…)

Koremitsu had this doubt as Hikaru showed a hollow expression, looking overly quiet.

He was typically so innocent and optimistic, but at this point, seemed a completely diffferent person.

Whenever Koremitsu saw this face, he had a fear, thinking that he knew nothing about Hikaru, worried that he was only seeing the appearance Hikaru showed.

Hikaru drowned in a river.

That was a fact.

But was that death really due to an accident?

Or was the truth written in the past chain mails, that it was a murder?

Tsuyako said that he committed suicide.

Koremitsu had all sorts of hypotheses, doubts and views, but could not be certain on which was correct.

The only one who knew the answer, Hikaru, would not say anything.

What exactly was Hikaru thinking after hearing Tsuyako’s words?

What was he thinking?

Tsuyako probably would not have imagined that Hikaru was right beside her, listening in.

She brushed her ruffled red hair, and wailed with an anxious expression, saying to Hikaru,

“I was scared. I did not dare ask him where those scars came from, but I just could not help but worry. That was why I kissed him.”

Tōjō had furiously stated that Tsuyako kissed Hikaru brazenly at the turf club during Golden Week.

Aoi also said that she could not forgive Tsuyako whenever she thinks about how Tsuyako might been the last one Hikaru kissed.

However, the kiss at the turf club contained the worries Tsuyako had.

She bit her lips, and lowered her eyes.

“After I kissed Hikaru, he stated with a calm look that we cannot do such a thing again, and he broke up with me.”

She spoke in distress.

Hikaru remained stoic, but his eyes were showing anguish.

Yes, Hikaru decided to break up with all the other girls he dated, so that he could focus on being with Aoi.

We can no longer date like before.

I can no longer be your lover.

To those women, these words might have been so cruel.

But Tsuyako lifted her head abruptedly, speaking in a stiff tone,

“None of those matters. Even though Hikaru broke up with me, I just needed him to fulfill that most important promise, as long as he was in my world.”

Her pale face was flushed slightly, her neck straight.

Only at this instance did she revert back to being her usual proud, regal self.

In the face of the might she showed, Koremitsu could practically feel a slap on her.

The most beautiful, imposing red weeping cherry blossoms in the garden..

However, her eyes showed a depressed tint, and in her misery, she spoke hoarsely,

“But Hikaru is dead…”

Her face was contorted, she tried her best to gulp her breath, and held onto Koremitsu, seemingly unable to support herself.

In his panic, Koremitsu supported the warm, soft body, and the lump of red hair was draped upon his arms.

“Why? Why did Hikaru die? You can answer me that, right…Mr Akagi!?”

Tsuyako narrowed her eyes, seemingly enduring this tremendous amount of pain as she yelled at Koremitsu.

The voice was filled with utter sadness.

The white slender fingers grabbing Koremitsu’s shoulders were trembling.

“I…”

Koremitsu too felt his chest being carved out.

The seductive Tsuyako, the Tsuyako who loved to smile, the Tsuyako who remained poignantly unmoved by all the stares and gossips as she held her head high, Koremitsu's first 'sempai'–

She spoke to Koremitsu at the courtyard corridor fearlessly, danced elegantly in the club room, latched onto him by the elbow as they walked about in school, continued laughing beside Koremitsu; all these images in his memories were completely different from how she was at this point, causing his gut to wrench.

He really wanted to do something for her.

He really hoped that he could help her, that he could save her.

But he too did not know the answer to Tsuyako's question.

Koremitsu never heard anything from Hikaru about the latter's feelings, thoughts, his death, the long story that encompassed everything.

Koremitsu did say that he would wait for the day Hikaru would explain everything.

He could not tell Tsuyako whether Hikaru did on his own will, or that he was murdered, or that it was due to an accident.

"Sorry…"

Koremitsu gritted his teeth as he answered.

At this moment, a stern voice replied beside him,

“If you can get the answer, will you revert back to how you were before? If I tell you what happened to me…tell you all the sins I committed fully, will you be how you were before?”

Koremitsu gasped as he looked over at Hikaru.

And Hikaru watched on with a solemn, stiff expression.

His eyes were filled with adamance, that if Tsuyako wished for it, he would fully explain everything if it could really help her. No matter how much of a taboo it was, how despairing it was, he would say it all.

Koremitsu felt a dizziness as he gulped nervously, and said,

“If…if you know how Hikaru died…will you become how you were before, sempai?”

Tsuyako looked up at Koremitsu, her eyes showed a great quiver.

She wanted to know, yet she was of knowing–the complicated feelings caused her face to freeze, and then, she weakly let go of the hands grabbing Koremitsu’s shoulder.

She then muttered in a lethargic manner,

“This…is how I already am. The rusty hair color, a woman filled with vengeance. I really hated the girl who was beloved by her fiance, and doted on by everyone around her. I grumble every single day, wondering why my hair is rustic, and not black…”

The dry lips showed a tragic smile.

Hikaru’s eyes too were filled with distress, the glaring summer sun shining down on everyone.

The petals leaking red liquids were scattered all over the ground, and the shadows casted by Koremitsu and Tsuyako covered them. Hikaru was definitely present, but his shadow was not.

She shook her head.

“Well, I suppose it does not solve anything. Hikaru is no longer around, and the moon is still shrouded.”

She spoke adamantly, her lowered stare trembling slightly.

“Once the moonlight vanishes, the spider will appear to bind everything together The flowers will all wilt as well.”

“What’s it about the spider, sempai? I heard that you have a shrine worshipping one at your house. Is it related to that? Also, the ‘woman’ you said before…”

At this moment, the clouds covered the sky.

Tsuyako’s eyes lost all luster, now shrouded in haze.

Her expression was ambiguous, her lips, nose, eyebrows–her silhouette was becoming blurred.

“Locked in that shrine…is a woman who became a spider due to excessive love and envy, devouring her husband and the mistress…to prevent her from continuing her acts, she was worshipped as a goddess. That was a long time ago, probably in the Heian Era…I am her descendant.”

Warm gales started to blow, and the red hair fluttered like fresh blood.

Hikaru, standing beside Koremitsu, gasped in shock.

The girl with Tsuyako’s appearance stood in the middle of the flower remnants, her expression hazy, saying,

“The woman who ate her husband and the mistress–is call
Rokujō”

Chapter 6

A few days after Tsuyako said those ominous words in the garden, trivial matters happened to Aoi one after another.

While on her way to school, her pleated skirt was torn by a small blade; there were plucked Hollyhocks placed on her desk and in her cupboard. She lost her books, pencil case, gym clothes, and the palette and brushes she left in the club room.

Whenever that happened,

“This is bad, Mr. Akagi!”

Hiina of the newspaper club would come notifying him.

On this morning, Hiina was standing in front of Koremitsu’s table, putting her round face on the table as she rattled off,

“Who can the culprit possibly be? It seems Her Highness Aoi would be the victim of such annoying acts during the time she was Lord Hikaru’s fiancee, but this is the first time the culprit has acted so overtly. The Matriarch Asa is getting scary though. If the culprit is caught, she’ll definitely roll him in a Sumaki sushi roll and deport him on a ship to the freezing lands of Siberia.”

She even pretended to shiver a little, and then gave a boyish smile.

“Let’s look for the culprit together, Mr. Akagi. Her Highness Aoi might have an improved view of you if you do so. Perhaps even the Matriarch Asa will approve of your relationship with her.”

“For me…it doesn’t matter. We weren’t dating in the first place.”

Honoka was seated at her chair, playing with the cellphone. She had been trying her best to avert meeting Koremitsu in the eyes, and Koremitsu himself could not find the chance to talk with her. He wanted to have a proper chat with her one of these days, but he did not have the time at this point.

“According to the intel I collected, it seemed someone saw a black, long haired girl around the time the events occurred. Let’s look for this woman.”

“Alright now, just hurry back to your class.”

“Ah, where are you going, Mr. Akagi?”

“Toilet.”

“I’m joining you then.”

“Don’t follow me!”

He shook Hiina off his trail, entered the toilet cubicle, and sat on the seat with a bitter look on his face.

“It seems Miss Oumi has already suspected somebody, and only approached you as a formality. I guess even Asa has already known it, but could not make a huge ruckus out of it because of that person’s status, and she must be really anxious about it.”

Hikaru frowned as he spoke from the ceiling.

“Did…senpai do it after all?”

“Tsuyako will not do such a thing, but–“

Hikaru spoke harshly with a serious look.

“It might be possible if it is Rokuj
ō
.”

–I am the descendant of the spider. The woman who ate her husband and the mistress–is called
Rokujō

Tsuyako said with a hazy expression, the alluring whiff of poppy seeds coming from her.

–Are you able to stop Rokujo, Mr. Akagi?

Tsuyako’s voice appeared in his mind together with the alluring fragrance, and he felt a heavy heart, his chest seemingly heavy, stuffed with stones.

(Is it really possible for a woman to become another one completely?)

However, Tsuyako was clearly afraid of Rokujo’s shadow, troubled over it.

“Hm, anyway, there’s no doubt that it has something to do with senpai.”

Koremitsu gritted his teeth.

How can they possibly stop Rokujo’s madness? Even Aoi would not be able to handle such things happening to her all the time.

Hikaru sank into deep thought with a serious expression, and soon spoke,

“First, we have to lure Tsuyako after from Miss Aoi. Once that happens, Miss Aoi will be safe, and Tsuyako will calm down. Anyway, Tsuyako needs a change of mood.”

“So in other words, what do you mean?”

“Can you please ask Tsuyako out for a date?”

◇ ◇ ◇

“Mr. Akagi?”

Upon seeing Koremitsu at the second year classroom before the morning homeroom meeting, Tsuyako showed a skeptical expression.

“Come with me for a while, senpai.”

“Accompany you? Homeroom is about to begin, you know? Eh! Mr. Akagi–“

Koremitsu callously grabbed Tsuyako by the hand and left the classroom just like that.

“The delinquent king just kidnapped the Moon Matriarch!” “Are those two hooking up together after all?”
He could hear such voices behind him.

Tsuyako rolled her eyes in shock as Koremitsu led her by the hand. Back then, it was Tsuyako dragging Koremitsu around the school on a date, but the situation has been reversed.

Both of them changed their shoes at the shoe locker, passed through the school gates, and proceeded down the pedestrian sidewalks.

“Mr. Akagi, there will be new rumors if you do such things again. It is best that you do not get involved with me. I did tell you before that you do not have to attend club activities.”

“I heard them, but I can’t agree to that. You’re my senpai after all.”

Koremitsu held Tsuyako by the hand as he said adamantly. Tsuyako looked shocked, her shoulders shivering.

“But.”

“Senpai, you’re still troubled about Rokujō, right? Just enjoy yourself and release your frustrations, you’ll feel better. Hikaru did say this before, right?”

Tsuyako’s eyes immediately watered the moment Koremitsu mentioned Hikaru’s name, all sorts of feelings swirling in her.

“So, for today, let’s try out the route Hikaru recommended.”

(I’ll let you guide us around, Hikaru.)

Koremitsu glanced diagonally upwards, and Hikaru gave a confident beam in return,

“First, let us head to the tropical gardens. Tsuyako does like the Banyan and banana trees.”

“First, let’s go to the tropical gardens! The Banyan and banana trees are waiting!”

◇ ◇ ◇

They took the train, and arrived at the garden by the sea.

They passed through the main gates, marvelling at the soft, bent branches, the southern trees with the leaves shaped like a rooster’s crown and the yellow Cannas as they strolled on. They passed through the dim forests, and there was a bowl-shaped coliseum surrounded by large cherry blossom trees. There was even a cat napping on the bench, the place was so serene. A little further on, and they would arrive at the large birdcage-like dome.

Amidst them, what welcomed them were the dazzling sunlight shining through the window, the sounds of ripples and splashes as the artificial waterfall roared on; the rich green canopy of coconut and ferns, the red hibiscuses, the flowers

that were gathered together like the crimson birds, and the damp air.

“The English name of the Heliconia Rostrata is the Hanging Lobster Claw. Here, if you look at this crimson flower, it does look like the dried shrimps placed on the sushi rice, no?”

Hikaru quickly boasted the vast knowledge he had.

All the trees were growing high into the sky, showing the vibrancy they had. The leaves were many, rustling away. The flowers too were dyed with bright colors like red, orange and yellow, capturing the eyes of many, being full of life.

Tsuyako, who had been looking bashful while riding on the train, blushed slightly while the train was moving, her eyes regaining life in them.

“Hikaru and I have been to this garden many times. Hikaru told me that whenever he wanted to cheer up, he would come by here, and get power from the trees and flowers here. You see the trees growing by the waterfall? The flowers with the patterns look like a
kirin
, right? It is called the
Cyathea Mertensiana
. Ah, and this Banana tree, I really like it.”

There was a tall tree, ostensibly trying its best to spread a green fan; Tsuyako stood in front of it, and smiled as she looked up.

“I said to Hikaru before that I really want to dance while holding such a beautiful fan.”

Tsuyako walked around in the park, and her expression brightened as she was seemingly reminiscing about Hikaru. Hikaru too gave a delighted, gentle look as he witnessed this.

(Senpai seems a lot more energetic now, Hikaru.)

As long as Tsuyako was stable, Rokujō would probably vanish.

It was merely an optimistic thought, but Koremitsu’s heart finally calmed down.

After that, they walked around the dome for quite a while, had some Indonesian spicy rice, prawns and vermicelli salad at a restaurant, went window shopping, saw a ship on display in a pavillion, strolled about the plaza, did some workout at a gym, rested at a bench by the seaside while drinking juice, and by that time, it was almost evening.

Tsuyako laughed away loudly a few times beside Koremitsu.

They were on the way back, and Tsuyako suddenly stopped in front of the cherry blossoms tree that was starting to be dyed golden.

She stared quietly at the cherry blossom with a reminiscing look,

“When the flowers bloom…that is the beginning of it all…after that comes summer, and once autumn ends…there’s winter to pass…”

She muttered in a lonely manner.

Koremitsu knew that the first time Hikaru and Tsuyako met was during a spring night, when the moon was shrouded, beneath the cherry blossom tree. At this point, one had to wonder if Tsuyako was praying for Hikaru to appear from behind the tree, smiling.

Her expression was akin to that of one hoping for a miracle that would not happen as she stared at the sturdy branches engulfed by the golden light.

Koremitsu’s chest started to ache.

At this moment, Hikaru spoke warmly,

“Hey, Tsuyako, when we were still dating, I once said to you ‘if my fiancee was not Miss Aoi, but you, what would have happen?’ The sons of the Mikados have to marry the females of either the Udates and the Saotomes. The legitimate son marries Tsuyako of the Udates, and I will marry Miss Aoi of the Saotomes. On the other hand, the reverse might occur.”

(Is that so? In that case, there’s a chance senpai could have been Hikaru’s fiancee.)

Hikaru stared at Tsuyako with clarity.

And Tsuyako had her eyes lowered in front of the cherry blossoms.

“Back then, Tsuyako smiled and answered, ‘in that case, I will not be dancing right now, I will not be able to know of such intense love, and I will not be able to love you. I do not need a date other than this–“

Those words would not be able to reach Tsuyako’s ears.

But the emotions she had back then was echoed clearly in Hikaru’s words,

“‘I do not wish to change fates with Miss Aoi. Even if God allows that to happen, I will refuse so.’ that was what she said.”

Koremitsu’s heart raced, for he seemed to hear that clear, proud voice.

“Back then, Tsuyako was strong and beautiful, always looking so proud, like the bright red weeping cherry blossom blooming in the middle of a garden.”

Hikaru narrowed his eyes lovingly.

He was so proud of this firm, dignified Tsuyako, how ravishing she was.

Hikaru’s emotions have moved Koremitsu’s heart.

“Hey, senpai. Hikaru did say that you’re the most beautiful red weeping cherry blossoms that stands tall in the middle of a garden. It’s true.”

Koremitsu really wanted to convey Hikaru’s feelings to Tsuyako, who had her head lowered, her back shrunk.

He really wanted to let her know of the love and delight Hikaru had showered upon her.

Tsuyako’s shoulders shivered as she clasped her hands tightly, muttering guiltily as she said,

“I-I’m not like that…”

Hikaru spoke with an earnest expression,

“Tsuyako, what does
Rokujō want you to do? Is there anything I can do for you?”

Koremitsu too asked with a serious look,

“Senpai, you must be feeling troubled now, right? Tell me, is there anything I can do?”

“…Mr Akagi.”

Tsuyako lifted her head at Koremitsu, trembling. She let out a weak, helpless look, her stare wavering; she was probably hesitant about it. After biting her lower lip slightly, she hoarsely replied, panting,

“…Rokujō.”

Koremitsu too held his breath as he listened in intently.

“Rokujō…wants me to…”

Sudenly, Tsuyako winced.

“!”

“What’s the matter, senpai!?”

Tsuyako stared at the cherry blossom branch with a pale look. There was a thread dangling from it, and on its tip was a spider, so miniscule one had to focus on it, swaying away.

Her eyes had lost all life, and reverted back to being hazy.

“No…no. Do not…so-sorry, I feel a little…I-I need the washroom. Please head back for now, Mr Akagi.”

“Hey, senpai.”

Tsuyako darted off without waiting for Koremitsu’s reply.

“Damn it.”

Koremitsu glared at the spider, and gave chase after Tsuyako.

However, once he arrived at the toilet outside the dome structure, he could not find Tsuyako no matter how he waited.

“She’s not in the toilet?”

He pulled out the cellphone, and dialled Tsuyako’s number.

“Ugh, now I’m left on voicemail.”

The result was the same no matter how many times he tried.

“I have a bad feeling about this, Koremitsu. Let us check the school.”

“Oh yeah, maybe senpai went back to get her bag.”

With no other ideas, Koremitsu could only rush back to the school, spending the same time he did coming to this place.

The sun had already set by the time he arrived, yet the school campus was lit.

Koremitsu checked Tsuyako’s shoe locker once he entered. There was only a pair of indoor shoes, not the outdoor shoes.

“She didn’t come by…?”

Hikaru stood by his side, sighing.

No matter how Koremitsu tried to call, he could not get through. If only she had returned home safely…

For added precaution, Koremitsu decided to check the classroom. Thus, he tried looking down the corridor from the entrance, and just when he started to move,

“Look at that, Koremitsu!”

Hikaru exclaimed stiffly.

Koremitsu too was shocked.

There was a woman, dressed in uniform under the hazy moon, standing in front of the Oleander tree in the garden.

The woman had glossy black hair reaching from her shoulders to her waist, swaying bewitchingly in the air.

There were ripped flowers scattered all around that woman, and just when Koremitsu’s group watched her with bated breath, she peeled the flowers, crushed them, and tossed them away with her slender arms.

Oumi did say that after what happened to Aoi, someone witnessed a woman with long black hair.

(Is it her–)

“Hey!”

Koremitsu ran towards the garden.

The other person too started running, the glossy hair swaying about. At that instant, an alluring fragrance grazed past his nostrils; it was the aroma of poppy seeds being added to the fire! The sweet, alluring–!

“Wait, are you Rokujō!?”

The clouds covered the moon, and his vision was dimmed. The woman darted through the woods skilfully, her rich black hair only appearing sparsely.

His heart was throbbing wildly, ostensibly breaking apart, and it was sizzling deep inside his head. Amidst the darkness, Koremitsu stared at the target while gasping, but soon lost sight of it.

“Whew!”

(What’s with that woman?)

“Hikaru, did you see her face?”

Koremitsu turned his neck around, and Hikaru, floating in the air, shook his head bitterly,

“It was too dark; I could not tell.”

“Damn it.”

Koremitsu sat on the ground, and groaned as he looked skyward.

Was that woman Rokujō?

(Her silhouette…seems rather tall for a woman. She’s probably the same height as senpai here…I guess. But the hair’s completely different. The woman has black hair, but senpai…did hate her hair before she met Hikaru; she felt unhappy about it, even complaining why she did not have black hair.)

This person seemed similar to Tsuyako, yet seemed a completely different person.

(Ugh, I don’t know!)

At this moment, the cellphone in his bag rang.

It was from Tsuyako!

“Senpai!”

Koremitsu called out harshly, and Hikaru too brought his face over with a tense look.

A hoarse voice could be heard,

“…Mr Akagi, leave me alone now.”

The silhouettes of Tsuyako and the black-haired girl who plucked the flowers overlapped, causing Koremitsu’s back to chill.

With a harsh–and trembling voice, Tsuyako continued,

“It is for your sake…there is no way to stop Rokujō. The stench can never be removed. It still sticks on me no matter how I try to wash it away. I cannot remove that odor…that foul stench–“

“Senpai, where’re you now?”

Silence descended, with the sound of water in the background.

“…Do not call me senpai anymore.”

She muttered with an utterly lethargic tone, and hung up the phone.

Standing beside him, Hikaru looked as if his heart was ripped apart.

♢ ♢ ♢

“You got to be kidding. How else am I supposed to address her?”

The next morning.

With his eyebrows raised, Koremitsu walked down the dirt track leading to the school.

“If she’s in front of me, I’ll call her senpai a hundred times over!”

Beside him, Hikaru spoke quietly,

“Tsuyako does not wish for you to get involved, Koremitsu.”

“Are we just going to leave her alone? Your worries over senpai aren’t settled, right?”

“That is not the case. I am truly worried here, but I have been thinking, why would
Rokujō–“

Just when Hikaru’s eyes were about to sink into the abyss of thoughts.

The cellphone in Koremitsu’s bag rang.

Was it Tsuyako?

He took it out to confirm, and then, his lips curled into a frown.

(An anonymous mail–some advert from a porn website or something?)

He was about to delete it, but stopped once he saw the title.

“The women who were with Lord Hikaru. Second Act: ‘Tsuyako Udate’.”

At that instance, his throat was parched.

(Is this message just like the one sent to that braided girl?)

Back then, the name mentioned in the message title was Yū.

Hikaru, glancing from the side, frowned as well.

Once he opened the message, he saw the filthy terms like ‘whore’, ‘lewd’, and there were also contents regarding the ‘spider’s blood’.

During the Heian Era, one of the Udate’s female ancestors became a lover, biting to death her husband and the mistress.

It was also written that during the beginning of the Showa Period, that was a woman of the Udate family who gorged her husband’s mistress eyes at her maiden house, cut the hair off, killed the mistress, and dragged the husband into the sea as she committed suicide.

Even till now, there was still the demonic blood of the spider within the bodies of the Udates’ females, and would react based on jealousy. Lord Hikaru was

probably bitten to death by a Udate woman–Tsuyako. That was written on the message.

“!!”

Koremitsu deleted the message, and stuffed the cellphone into his bag.

“It was the same as Yū back then. This is disgusting! Who sent such messages in the first place?”

“But I must say, if it were someone who simply wanted to create commotion, I do feel that person knows too much about the Udates.”

Hikaru too looked on grimly.

“Then is the sender someone you know? For what reason?”

“I do not know.”

Hikaru answered stiffly, and kept his mouth shut, sinking into deep thought.

More students started to make their way to school around them, and Koremitsu too went silent. However, his head was sizzling due to rage.

(Damn it. If such messages are going around like this, everyone’s going to think that senpai’s the one who did such annoying things to Aoi. I don’t know who sent this, but I won’t forgive that person.)

His eyes were glaring, causing fear in the other students; he changed his shoes at the locker, and as he walked down the corridor to his classroom,

There was an apprehensive voice behind him.

“Akagi!”

Dashing towards him at a startling rate was Honoka, who had her eyes raised.

“Great, you’re here in school now, Akagi! Come with me!”

Honoka panted as she grabbed Koremitsu by the elbow, and dragged him along.

Hikaru widened his eyes, and Koremitsu too looked anxious.

“H-hey, Shikibu! What’s this all about?”

Even though she never wanted to look at him during the past few days.

(Isn’t she still angry at me? Didn’t she say something like I don’t care about this guy anymore? Didn’t she think that I’m a lost cause?)

Honoka raised her lips, and said,

“The Lord Hikaru portrait Her Highness Aoi has drawn disappeared from the art room.”

“What!?”

Koremitsu knew too that Aoi had been drawing a portrait of Hikaru ever since that birthday date at the theme park.

She had said abashedly to Koremitsu before that she was inapt at drawing human profiles as she did not have much practice, so she was really anxious about it. However, she would show it to him once she was done.

And now that portrait is missing?

(Don’t tell me that yesterday–)

Koremitsu’s gut wrenched as he recalled the Rokujō that plucked the flowers.

Hikaru too showed a solemn look.

Honoka dragged Koremitsu along, saying,

“It’s said that the painting discovered to be missing this morning, and everyone’s thinking whether it was stolen. The Matriarch Asa even charged over to upperclassman Tsuyako, interrogating her if she stole it.”

“Are you serious?”

Did Asai Saiga really go over to find senpai?

“This is bad, Koremitsu! If Asa’s doing such a thing, it means her patience is at its limit. The Udates have deep ties with the Mikados, so she did not wish to blow this up. If she is looking for Tsuyako right away–!”

It was rare for Hikaru to be this anxious.

“Hurry, Koremitsu! Stop Asa before she stuffs Tsuyako into concrete and throws her into the Tokyo Bay!”

“Oh, okay.”

Even the cousin and childhood friend Hikaru would see Asai as such a character; Koremitsu inadvertently sweated as he increased his pace.

Honoka let go of Koremitsu’s hand, and both of them dashed down the stairs in large strides.

“The Matriarch Asa looks really scary with that killing aura around her. Upperclassman Tsuyako may be killed by her if we don’t hurry!”

Honoka was brave enough, not being terrified of Koremitsu’s savage looks when they first met, but at this point, she was shivering in fear all over.

Koremitsu knew that he should not be wondering about such things, but upon realizing how dangerous Asai looked in all sorts of ways, he inadvertently felt some sympathy for her.

Koremitsu himself had been a victim of such rumors, like how he beat a dozen hooligans or so from other schools to near death, or that a certain school’s wrestling club president disappeared without a trace after getting a glimpse of him, or that how he took on a member of the
yakuza
with a dagger, and made the other party apologize.

Both of them darted down the corridor, and there was the classroom with the Japanese Dance Club signplate.

Asai’s voice could be heard from within.

“Such a shameless woman.”

(Ack!)

The cold, sharp voice was so strong it could have severed the other party’s heart in half.

“It is great that a person like you is not married to the Mikados. The Mikados do not need to deal with a thief, a filthy whore, a flawed person.”

Once he opened the door, he found Asa and Tsuyako, dressed in a sleeved kimono, were glaring at each other.

Asai’s stare was as icy as that of the SIberian Winter, but the startling thing was that Tsuyako was not backing down. The latter shot back at Asai’s stare with a proper, feisty stare of her own, causing one to be skeptical as to whether she was the one who called with such a weak voice the previous day.

“A whore? I am surprised you do understand those rotten terms really well, Miss Asai. Is it because you wrote them in the books you like? Are you not like one yourself, barging in here without a greeting and starting a ruckus?”

“Do you have the right to say such things? You have done annoying things since young, like plucking off all the Tulips in Aoi’s garden, putting a rat’s carcass by the windowsill of Aoi’s room. Do you really hate Aoi that much?”

“What about you, Miss Asai? You love to show up for Miss Aoi whenever something happened to the latter, but you have always been lax about

protecting her. Or is that that you are being all confused the less you are able to protect Miss Aoi. Besides, where is the proof that I did so?”

“You are the same as usual, pretending not to know anything, pushing the blame onto others, acting nonchalant even while eloping with somebody’s fiance.”

“It is because the one who got betrayed was lacking in charm, I suppose?”

“Where is Hikaru’s portrait.”

“I do not know. Where indeed?”

The two girls practically had swords drawn as an icy chill filled the room. Embarrassingly for Koremitsu, he was standing at the door, unable to step inside.

(A women’s spat…is really scary. My back’s itching in fear.)

Honoka was glaring at Koremitsu, ostensibly asking why the latter had yet to step in

But Koremitsu only felt that if he were to step inside, he would be chased out by the avalanche-filled air.

Like Koremitsu, Hikaru too peeked into the classroom at the door worriedly.

Speaking of which, it was the first time he heard of Tsuyako pulling pranks on Aoi–no, it seemed Aoi had said something of that sort before,

—
Miss Tsuyako does hate me too. She has been bullying me since our childhoods, and deliberately came to my garden…

(Right, Aoi did say something like that even though she stopped midway through. Does Hikaru know?)

Koremitsu glanced to the side, and found his friend watching the verbal spat with a tentative look.

(For goodness sake…if you’re the harem prince, at least you should know how to settle a dispute between girls, right? What will happen if there’s a harem war going on?)

Just when Koremitsu was about to lower his shoulders.

Tsuyako suddenly lowered her tone.

The ferocious tone she used before had now changed to a calm, serious one,

“Hey, Miss Asai, do you not suppose that the premise behind all this is wrong? Hikaru’s portrait is missing, but why is it that you are here, and not Miss Aoi? Is the portrait not hers? Miss Aoi, Hikaru’s fiancee?”

“…Aoi has yet to arrive at school. She does not intend to tell you that the portrait is missing.”

Asai replied unhappily, giving a look that seemed to say ‘why do I have to answer this question?’

Tsuyako then asked with a mature expression,

“You have been protecting Miss Aoi all this while, Miss Asai, but deep inside your heart, what do you really think?”

“What do you mean?”

Asai’s eyes revealed a sharp glare.

“When you are protecting Miss Aoi, Miss Asai, you are doing it not for her sake, but for your own sake, right? Since you are very intelligent, you should be able to comprehend the feelings you have about her? To keep protecting her, to guard her for hurt, to prevent her from being sullied, you,”

Asai’s face looked as though it froze up.

There was anguish, shame and anxiety appearing from deep within the eyes.

“No Tsuyako. You must not say such things!”

Upon hearing Hikaru’s tense yell, Koremitsu panicked.

At that moment, Asai raised her right hand up high, ready to slap Tsuyako’s cheek.

A harp sound echoed, and Tsuyako staggered, her glossy, rich red hair scattered in an instance.

It was a merciless, proper slap.

Koremitsu darted into the room, and grabbed Asai by the arm.

“That’s enough, Asai! Enough already!”

“…!”

Asai’s face contorted once she saw Koremitsu,and she narrowed her eyes sharply.

Tsuyako had her head lowered as she placed a hand on the cheek Asai slapped.

Honoka was at the door, watching Koremitsu and the rest with bated breath.

Hikar was embracing Tsuyako by the shoulders, ostensibly comforting her. However, Tsuyako did not realize, and Hikaru’s hands were entrenched into her shoulders.

“Slapping someone to the point of making your hand swollen? This isn’t something a girl should do, Asa.”

Koremitsu brought the red and swollen hand to Asai, causing the latter’s face to redden, and shake off Koremitsu’s hand immediately.

“I told you not to address me that.”

Asai then bit her lips, rage and shame appearing briefly before reverting back to her stoic look. She spoke sternly,

“…Miss Tsuyako, if anything is to happen the next time, even your identity as one of the Udates will help you. Please do remember this well.”

Asai walked away, and Honoka frantically stepped aside.

“Miss Asai.”

Tsuyako said as her hand remained on her cheek.

“It is time for you to tell the truth…Hikaru is no longer around.”

Her silent voice was filled with anguish; it seemed she was worried for Asai, even giving the latter an advice…

Behind Tsuyako, Hikaru lowered his eyebrows slightly.

Asai’s shoulders quivered as she stopped in her tracks, before she strode off again.

Once Asai passed by, Honoka hurried in,

“Upperclassman Tsuyako! Are you alright? Ahh, your face is completely red. I’ll get a wet handkerchief.”

Once she confirmed the condition of Tsuyako’s face, Honoka ran back to the corridor.

Koremitsu missed out on the chance to talk, and Tsuyako did not look at him as she continued to mutter to herself,

“I think I said…too much unnecessary things to Miss Asai. But I am concerned about her. Our attitudes towards Hikaru…are so contrasting yet so similar.”

(What does she mean…?)

So contrasting…so similar…

Hikaru probably understood here, but he merely lowered his eyes and listened in on Tsuyako’s words, looking really feeble.

Tsuyako too started to smile faintly.

This smile was the same as Hikaru’s whenever he was at a loss of what to do, and this caused Koremitsu to feel a throbbing pain.

“If I can only do what I advised, nobody would have to suffer…in the end, I am merely that brat with the red rusty looking hair.”

Hikaru lifted his head, staring at Tsuyako painfully. It seemed he was apologetic for being unable to relieve Tsuyako’s pain–dying while leaving her behind, and being unable to fulfill that promise.

Koremitsu too felt conflicted deep within.

Was dying and leaving those important to oneself such a tragic thing?

Honoka hurried back with a wet handkerchief, and placed it on Tsuyako’s cheek, taking care of the latter worriedly and caringly.

It seemed Tsuyako would calm down somewhat with Honoka taking such sincere care.

“Thank you, Miss Shikibu. You brought Mr Akagi here, did you not?”

“Eh, ah, well…Akagi’s crude, foul-mouthed, and is like a delinquent, but he can be reliable when the time comes for it. That’s why,”

Honoka’s voice got softer as she spoke.

Tsuyako smiled, seemingly watching a cute underclassman, and then showed that smile at Koremitsu.

“Oh yes, thank you for coming here to stop Miss Asai, Mr Akagi.”

“No, I didn’t do anything much. I was just standing by the sidelines.”

Koremitsu’s voice too got softer.

Tsuyako’s eyes narrowed amicably as she watched Honoka and Koremitsu fidget abashedly, and then spoke with a gentle, lonely tone,

“I wish to cease all club activities at this time. You two do not have to come by anymore.”

♢ ♢ ♢

“I was…angry at Upperclassman Tsuyako.”

It was break time.

Koremitsu and Honoka were standing at the fence surrounding the roof, and Hikaru floated gently behind Koremitsu.

Honoka stared at the fence as she continued to murmur,

“She did such a thing to you…I know I really don’t have the right to be angry, but even so, I just can’t feel good about it whenever I think about it…I really can’t help but feel that I can’t talk to her normally anymore. I can’t even attend any club activities…”

A cool breeze blew by, and Honoka clumsily pulled the straight hair strands resting on her cheeks to the back of her ears.

“But after school…I was a little concerned, so I snuck out to look at the club room. Upperclassman Tsuyako has been practicing alone…and she dropped the fan onto the floor quite a few times.”

“…The fan?”

“A few times…and she dropped it after picking it up…she looks unhappy as she picks it up, but she dropped it again once she started to dance. She looks extremely pale, her lips were bleeding because she bit them too hard…she’s really suffering.”

Through the bitterness in Honoka’s tone, Koremitsu imagined the sight of Tsuyako dropping the fan a few times, and felt his chest tighten

Behind him, Hikaru must have been feeling glum too.

“…SInce then, I’ve been sneaking by to watch, and this morning too…”

Honoka hesitated, and sank into deep thought.

“…”

She lowered her head, looked around the fence, and spoke up again,

“Did she do anything to Her Highness Aoi?”

“I don’t know.”

Perhaps Tsuyako did anything irritating to Aoi after becoming Rokujō. Tsuyako however did not deny this, and because of this, she might be feeling fearful and disgusted by the other person in her body, unable to dance because of the emotional turmoil.

But was it really the case?

Is there really an embodiment of the spider Rokujō within senpai?

Was the black haired woman he saw the previous day her?

Koremitsu felt a throbbing pain in his head, his temples stiffening.

Honoka lifted her head and stared at Koremitsu. Her eyes were flickering with sadness, and she spoke hoarsely,

“I think…I can understand Upperclassman Tsuyako’s reasons for doing this…if I were in the same situation as her, even if I know I’m the 3rd party, I’ll still be jealous of the other person…actually, I already did so.”

The terrified tone caused Koremitsu to be jolted within.

Within Honoka was an emotion of wanting to summon Rokujō…

Does every woman contain such conflicted, complicated feelings within them? Koremitsu did not know at all.

The secret Honoka let out caused Koremitsu to be slightly shocked.

(Women definitely aren't just the weak, gentle beings they appear to be.)

Even the firm-willed, carefree looking Honoka would have a feeling of wanting to hurt others out of jealousy.

Such a matter was twirling within Koremitsu's heart.

Honoka showed such a tragic expression as she softly muttered,

"…But, why…'now'…Lord Hikaru's already dead…even if she continues to be jealous of Her Highness Aoi, it's useless now. Or is it…that she did such things because…she feels lonely about his absence…"

Why 'now'?

Koremitsu too chewed upon the muttering Honoka just made.

(Yeah, why ‘now’?)

Why would Rokujō appear at this point even when Hikaru was dead?

—
I really…do not know what to do…I am scared, worried..I cannot sleep at night…
If this keeps up, I might end up destroying the flowers Hikaru treasures.

Koremitsu recalled the words Tsuyako said when she invited him to join the Japanese Dance club.

At this point, he knew that she was not saying it out of pretense, but from the bottom of her heart.

What exactly was the sort of Tsuyako’s ‘anxiety’?

The crux that caused
Rokujō to appear.

As long as he discovered that.

As long as he could eliminate that.

The pain throbbing through his mind got more intense. Koremitsu felt that like him, Hikaru too must have been feeling anxious.

“Erm, Akagi.”

Honoka suddenly raised her voice.

She continued to look at Koremitsu with a pressing look.

“Regarding Upperclassman Tsuyako, I shall try to do my best to comfort her for the time being. Don’t put all the burden upon yourself.”

(Ah, is that so…?)

Honoka said such words worriedly after seeing Koremitsu frown and grit his teeth.

It was a little forced, but she still showed a smile to Koremitsu.

That smile, eked out with all her might, caused his heart to tighten.

He felt that Honoka was quite a good woman, to do her best for him out of her own thoughtfulness even when she was feeling conflicted herself. Hikaru did appraise her to be a purple Heliotrope blooming towards the sun, firm-willed and

filled with love; clearly, he was accurate here.

“You’re supposedly angry with me, and now you’re helping me here; Thanks a lot, Shikibu.”

Koremitsu stared at Honoka right in the eyes as he said that.

If possible, he too wanted to show a light-hearted smile; whenever he tried to raise his lips however, his face would stiffen, and he would show a glaring, savage look.

Honoka shivered once she saw such a face…

And then, her expression lightened up somewhat.

“Right.”

She answered gently and shyly.

Koremitsu too felt abashed, sweet within.

“Okay then.”

He nodded slightly.

“Time to get back to the classroom.”

“Ah, you can go off first.”

“Eh?”

“I’m going to the toilet first.”

Honoka showed a shocked look, but later answered,

“Right, got it.”

She seemed to realize that Koremitsu wanted to settle some private matters alone, and showed a slightly worried look as she turned her head back at the door, before smiling and leaving the roof.

Upon seeing such a scene, Koremitsu had an itchiness in his heart.

And then, he muttered,

“…What do you think of Shikibu’s words, Hikaru?”

Hikaru, floating behind Koremitsu, moved to the latter's front, and answered with a serious look,

"I am wondering about the same thing too. Why would Rokujō appear at such a moment? If her jealousy at Miss Aoi was the cause, it should have appeared when I was alive. Also, I did mention before that she was not jealous of me dating other girls."

"That's a little too strange here, right? I don't really understand women, but normally put, they do get jealous, right?"

I already did so.
He recalled Honoka's mutter, and said,

"Saiga also said that senpai once plucked the flowers at Aoi's house when they were young, and placed a dead rat at her windowsill. She also said that she was jealous of Aoi before."

–I too am jealous of those blissful girls who were treated kindly by their fiances, loved and accepted by the people around them.

She did mutter such words with a gloomy look.
If only I had black hair…

Was that not referring to Aoi?

Hikaru’s eyebrows quivered slightly.

“That was before Tsuyako met me, during the time when she remained a shriveled body in the sturdy tree branches before she bloomed, before the buds even grew.”

Hikaru’s expression was hollow, yet his tone was full of adamance, almost to near belief.

(Hm…well, Hikaru does know senpai longer than I do….)

Tsuyako did say to Hikaru that she did not want to change lives with Aoi, that she did not want to know of him through another way. She was truly a firm-willed, dignified woman as she said that.

She never expressed regret over her choice.

And she would never compare herself with others.

(But what about ‘now’?)

The honest, optimistic eyes were shrouded in haze, becoming dim like the hazy moon.

Did she revert back to her old self because of Hikaru’s death?

To vent the loneliness and sadness they could not handle, humans would exert stronger emotions upon them, just as how Aoi lashed out at Hikaru’s funerary photo at the latter’s funeral to maintain an emotional balance…

Did Tsuyako try to replace the emptiness in her heart by hating Aoi?

Koremitsu pondered silently in frustration, and Hikaru muttered in a prayerful manner,

“It will be great if Tsuyako can get back to being herself and start to dance again.”

Koremitsu’s heart was pricked again.

(…He must be really anxious, being unable to cheer for senpai himself.)

Hikaru lowered his eyes, and silently muttered,

“Hey, Koremitsu…fulfilling a ‘promise’ is really a tough thing to do. I might have been a fool who never thought things through when I was alive. Only after my death did I realize…”

–When you dance, I will definitely be in the audience. I will applaud you there more than anyone else.

This was the promise Hikaru made with Tsuyako.

At that time, Hikaru must have said those words out of his own sincerity, with such clarity, cheerfulness in his voice and eyes. Back then, he must have believed that he would fulfill that problem.

“…I really am a fool who does not think things through.”

But at this point now, that was basically impossible…

If Hikaru could cry, he might even shed some tears.

The lowered sidelong face of his face was merely showing a rich, sore sadness.

“…A fool can only be cured when dead.”

Koremitsu muttered,

“So…after you died, you should be a little less foolish here.”

Hikaru lifted his head, and smiled.

He, unable to cry, would smile like this when he was sad. Koremitsu too understood that the smile was showing the will and endurance he had when suffering.

At this point, Hikaru was frustrated yet anguished deep within–yet he wanted to smile all he could.

“Then, I shall be a little smarter here.”

“Just a little, about the size of a crack.”

“I do think you do not have to emphasize that.”

“You’ll get cocky immediately if that’s not the case.”

“There is no one more humble than I in front of a cute girl.”

“What’s that? Is that a joke? That’s a lame one coming from you.”

Both of them bickered as they returned back to the classroom.

♢ ♢ ♢

During the next break, an unexpected visitor came by.

“Come with me here, Akagi.”

Shungo Tōjō called for Koremitsu with a frown on his face, and dragged the latter to an empty classroom.

Koremitsu had assumed the other party would chide him over Tsuyako’s matter, but unexpectedly, the latter handed two tickets to him with a scowl,

“You, take these.”

Tōjō was typically courteous when addressing Koremitsu, but was being crude this time around. Leaving that aside, Koremitsu stared at the items in Tōjō’s hand, and frowned.

They were two entrance tickets to an art gallery.

“There’s an art renaissance exhibition this coming Saturday.”

“You’re asking me out? You don’t have any friends too?”

The veins were popping out of Tōjō's temples.

"Who said I am going with you? What is the point of two men going to an art exhibition together?"

"…Am I wrong?"

"Ask Aoi out."

Tōjō snorted with a peeved look, and one could tell he did not wish to say such words.

"Miss Aoi?"

Beside them, Hikaru was saying something like 'I do feel that it is a refreshing thing for two men to attend an art exhibition together', and this time, he was muttering in shock.

Koremitsu too widened his eyes.

"Aoi, you say?"

Did he not say to never approach Aoi again?

The scowl intensified as wrinkles of frustrations appeared on Tōjō forehead.

“…Ever since you had that affair with Tsuyako at the garden party that evening, Hikaru’s older brother Kazuaki has been looking for Aoi. I head he has been chauffeuring her around because he was worried. Well, with Asai around, I do not think there would be any major incidents happening, and the foolish, incompetent Kazuaki might not have the guts to cause anything. However, there would be major issues for the son of the Mikados’ legal wife to be with Aoi, the daughter of the Saotomes.”

(Problems?)

“The engagement between Kazuaki and Tsuyako has been dissolved, and as everyone knows, Aoi’s fiance, Hikaru fell into a river on a rainy night, dying in such a foolish manner.”

“…Foolish, he says…Mr Shungo still despises me after all.”

Hikaru too started to lose his nerve.

“If Kazuaki is to start becoming intimate with Aoi, the people around us will consider that Kazuaki and Aoi will be married in the future. In terms of pairing, there will not be any problems. Rather, if we consider the family pedigrees, they will be the most suited.”

(Aoi’s going to marry Hikaru’s older brother…!?)

Koremitsu recalled the fragile looking bespectacled youth that drove to school to fetch Aoi, but the impression he had of that youth was too vague; he could only remember the body build and the glasses.

(Then, what about Aoi?)

He recalled what Aoi said, that Hikaru had just passed away, and that she was unwilling to marry anyone else. His heart started to turn sour.

Unknowingly, the current situation had developed into an undesired direction for Aoi.

Hikaru too pondered with a serious look.

“Kazuaki is plain, but is not a bad person. He is too formal, trips over often, and will crash into some things.”

Koremitsu did not know whether Hikaru’s description was meant to praise or criticize the person himself.

“However…”

The veins at Tōjō's temples pulsated, and his eyes were glaring sharply at Koremitsu.

"There is a big, big, big problem with Kazuaki's mother. My 3 older sisters are really a huge headache to deal with, but that mother is scarier than time. She is arrogant, prone to envy and rage, acts on impulse rather than reason, and would drag everything around her in. She always insists that she is correct, and if things do not work out, she would make a ruckus until she gets her way, even at the cost of her pride. Kazuaki's mother has the blood of the Udates too, and even amongst the Udates, she is the strongest and worst of them all. There was once where she dumped a truck of horse manure onto her husband's mistress house. How can I allow Aoi to marry into such a terrifying old hag's household? It is easy to see that AOi will suffer."

Tōjō prattled off with his eyebrows raised.

(This guy…gets very agitated whenever it involves Aoi…oh yeah, the mistress who had horse manure dumped onto her, was that Hikaru's mother)

Koremitsu could not catch on to what the other person was saying, and even calmed down as a result. It was probably because as a commoner, he could not understand the matters of the two great families Udates, Saotomes, and their complicated relationships with Hikaru's family.

To him, the concept of being betrothed before the coming of age was an alien concept to him.

“Aoi has been looking lethargic ever since she saw you have that shameless kiss with Tsuyako, and now with the recent despicable cases of bullying, she let down her guard here. Normally, Aoi would clearly refuse Kazuaki’s invitations to fetch her, and because of your betrayal, she might even think that she was betrayed by Hikaru again. It looks like she is still upset over that matter, and may have sealed her heart and listened to those around her blankly.”

Upon hearing such a chiding, Koremitsu too felt entwined by his own guilt, for he too was at fault.

Tōjō again frowned, showed a glum look as he frowned for a while, and stuffed the tickets into Koremitsu’s hand.

“To be honest, I really do not wish that you make amends with Aoi. You bragged that you would not let Tsuyako hurt Aoi, but you are still unable to do things even at this point. Such a useless man.”

“Ugh.”

“However, if this keeps up, the engagement between Kazuaki and Aoi will be unavoidable. Aoi might even accept it in self-defeat, and that is worse than being a nun. Also, I am worried that after seeing that dazzling fool of a harem prince Hikaru, who only had looks going for him, she would not have a higher impression on men, and would live in the shadow of Hikaru. Leaving aside Hikaru’s brain and personality of wanting to flirt around, I do not suppose there is any other man who had the conditions any woman would want when it comes to love. I do not know what methods you used to win her heart when you are so completely different from Hikaru; thought I felt there is a need to stop you, I do think that since there is Kazuaki’s matter to deal with, letting you through might

be for the better. After interacting with a bastard like you, her ability to judge characters would have fallen off the scales; perhaps she might be able to marry a decent man the next time."

"Hey, what do you mean by fallen off the scales here!?"

Koremitsu yelled as he clutched at the tickets in his hands, and beside him, Hikaru spoke with a pensive look.

"...That somehow makes sense."

Koremitsu inadvertently had the thought of wanting to punch Hikaru, but even if he did so, the fist would only pass through the latter's body.

Without waiting for Koremitsu's reply, Tōjō pointed at the former's nose with uppity and said,

"Listen you. What you have to do now, you bastard,is that you are to bring Aoi out to the art exhibition and bring her away from Kazuaki. Later, make sure not to hurt her as you vanish slowly from her sights. It will be better if she ends up leaving you out of fatigue, embarrassment or annoyance."

"Aren't you being too cruel here!? Those aren't humane words, alright!!"

"Not good. Class is starting. You should hurry back to your own class too, you bastard. Do not sell the tickets. You must invite Aoi out! You hear me? You must

invite her out. This is a promise between men.”

Tōjō hollered as he ignored the fuming Koremitsu, and frantically scurried off. Once class started, he must have combed his unkempt hair neatly, tidied the creases on his shirt, lifted his head, kept his chin back, and sat back at his seat with his back straightened.

“Since when did we have a promise?”

Koremitsu groaned as he stared at the art gallery tickets in his hand. Beside him, Hikaru mumbled,

“Mr Shungo…is someone who becomes irrational whenever Miss Aoi gets involved after all.”

Chapter 7

On the next day, the tickets still remained in the wallet in Koremitsu’s pocket.

“Goodness, what do I do now?”

It was noon break, and he was grumbling as he arched his back, strolling around.

Though he was told to invite Aoi out, he could not approach her due to Asai’s presence by the side, and ever since that garden party, Aoi had yet to reply to his cellphone messages. It would be questionable to think if she had seen his messages in the first place. Aoi had a pure yet stubborn personality; perhaps she deleted the messages without even looking.

(And I can’t just leave senpai alone.)

Why did Rokujō appear? Till this point, the reason was yet to be discovered.

Honoka and Michiru cleared up their lunch boxes, and went off to the Japanese Dance Club room.

“Upperclassman Tsuyako did say that she wishes to suspend club activities for the time being, but I think that she might be a little relieved to have someone with her and chitchat with her. Oh yeah, don’t be mistaken here. This isn’t for your sake. I’m just doing this because I’m worried about her. I’m a fan of

Upperclassman Tsuyako here. Got to cheer her up before her performance.”

She spoke in a cheerful tone.

(Shikibu really is a good woman…)

The recital was to be held two days later, Saturday evening.

Both Koremitsu and Hikaru hoped that Tsuyako would revert back to her usual self.

“Hey, what do you think I should do with these tickets?”

Koremitsu asked. Hikaru too showed an unenthusiastic look as he said,

“I too am worried about Miss Aoi…but I do think we cannot leave Tsuyako alone at this time.”

“That’s true.”

Better return these to Tōjō…just when Koremitsu wondered,

“Eh, you are?”

A rich, sweet voice could be heard from the front.

(Hm? Hikaru…wait, he’s beside me.)

The overly similar voice caused Koremitsu to be instantly confused.

He lifted his head, and found a skinny bespectacled youth standing over there.

(This guy’s Hikaru’s older brother–)

Kazuaki Mikado!

Beside Koremitsu, Hikaru widened his eyes in shock.

Kazuaki sized up Koremitsu hesitantly as the latter stared back, and ostensibly made up his mind as he said,

“Erm…you are that person who was with Tsuyako at the Shikatanis’ garden party…right? And, you even…kissed her.”

The voice quality was the exact same as Hikaru’s, but the tone was somewhat courteous, and his back was slouched. He was acting rather refined, and seemed to be of a good pedigree, but as Tōjō had emphasized many times, he seemed a little air-headed, ordinary in appearance, and did not seem to leave any impression besides the glasses…

Koremitsu did not intend to glare back, but the moment he narrowed his eyes, Kazuaki shrank back, and started apologizing.

“Ah, I do apologize for this. You may not remember, but I was there with Aoi back then. I am an alumni here, and I am looking for Aoi…so, about that, I just so happened to meet you at the garden, and I came to talk to you out of curiosity. A-are you angry…?”

“No…”

“I-Is that so…? Th-that is good…ah, my name is Kazuaki Mikado, an undergraduate. You are…?”

“…Koremitsu Akagi, High school freshman.”

Koremitsu answered back stiffly, unable to tell the intentions Hikaru’s brother had for talk to him. Kazuaki continued politely,

“Are you…going out with Tsuyako? Ahh, I am sorry for asking such a rude question so suddenly. It is just that…I used to be her..”

Koremitsu saw that Kazuaki was mumbling away, unable to say what he wanted, and filled in for the latter,

“You want to say that she used to be your fiancee, right?”

“Did you hear from Tsuyako?”

Kazuaki widened his eyes behind the glasses.

“Sorta…I guess.”

He did not hear it from Tsuyako herself, but Koremitsu mumbled vaguely.

For some reason, Kazuaki showed a look of relief.

“Also, I’m just her underclassman.”

“Really..? But you’ve kissed.”

“Ugh.”

Koremitsu was left speechless, and Kazuaki started panicking again,

“Ah, did I say too much again? Tsuyako…is rather carefree, so I went through quite some hardships when we were engaged…ah! She does not think of me as a partner, so please do not worry! I do find it surreal that such a glamorous, lively person like her was betrothed to this plain me. In lots of ways, Tsuyako is kind of like my mother, so I am not really used to handling her. Instead of that, I do find that Aoi…”

There was a reddish tinge beneath the glasses. Upon seeing that, Koremitsu was stunned.

(Has this guy really fallen for Aoi?)

Hikaru too frowned, probably troubled as well.

It seemed Kazuaki did not have the personality of reading the mood as he continued to fidget like a girl.

“I do find that a petite and quiet girl like Aoi would suit me better. Aoi used to be a potential fiancee for me. Tsuyako is a relative of my mother, and due to the overly close bloodline, the plan was for Aoi to be my fiancee. However, Aoi had already been betrothed to my younger brother, so I was chosen to be betrothed with Tsuyako. Right now however, Aoi and I are still single…that black hair Aoi has really is really pretty. I think black hair suits girls better; there is a refreshing, traditional Yamato Nadeshiko feeling.”

Kazuaki narrowed his eyes in an intoxicated manner.

(You’re saying too much, you skinny 4-eyes.)

This guy really is Hikaru’s brother in this aspect.
Koremitsu frowned as he thought, for he was startled when Kazuaki looked infatuated as he praised Aoi’s hair.

–I had been thinking that it would be good if I were a girl with black hair.

Tsuyako had a complex over her hair.

I really hated the girl who was beloved by her fiance, and doted on by everyone around her.
That was what she said too.

One of Aoi’s companions had noticed a female student with long black hair.

That black hair plucking the red Oleanders in the garden–

–But, why…’now’…

–Lord Hikaru’s already dead…even if she continues to be jealous of Her Highness Aoi, it’s useless now.

Those were the questions Honoka asked.

Those doubts lingered in Koremitsu’s mind, causing his heart to pound madly.

(No, wait. Senpai did go out with Hikaru before, right? That guy only got engaged because of family reasons…)

But, in that case,
it all made sense
.

The reason why Tsuyako had been targetting Aoi, the reason why she kissed Koremitsu in front of Aoi.

At that time, Kazuaki was with Aoi–

(Don’t tell me that was not meant for Aoi, but for this guy…)

Koremitsu had the feeling that he was closing in on the answer to the riddle he had been circling around, and his heart raced as a result.

Why did she have to show it to others?

(Because to this 4-eyes, senpai–)

Koremitsu was scowling in silence, and Kazuaki started panicking again.

“Ah, sorry, sorry. I have been saying too much myself. Well, even though I am Tsuyako’s ex-fiance, my presence is too weak because of this, and I think she had already forgotten all about it. Currently, we are not communicating in any way, so please do not worry and get along well with her. I think, erm, I will try my best for Aoi. If only I can convey the message better to my mother…uu, mother certainly is an unpredictable and volatile woman, so Aoi might be troubled here…”

At the end, he muttered these words as he departed, stumbling along the way and putting on his tilted glasses.

It seemed Hikaru was worried for that brother of his as he watched the silhouette.

“I got it, Hikaru.”

Koremitsu let out a crude snort as he said.

“Eh?”

Hikaru immediately turned to Koremitsu, widening his eyes.

“Senpai here is still jealous of Aoi, but she is not jealous of you and Aoi, but Aoi being with the skinny 4-eyes–your older brother Kazuaki.”

“Erm…in other words, Tsuyako likes Mr Kazuaki…huh?”

Hikaru murmured away, looking as if he did not understand.

“Oh, that is how it is. Why did Rokujō appear ‘now’? That is because after you died, Aoi became single; senpai is worried that Kazuaki, who liked Aoi since then, would do something to her. In fact, if we go by what Tōjō says, senpai is unable to contain her jealousy. The reason why Rokujō is black haired is because maybe she wanted to have black hair like Aoi, since Kazuaki likes the black-haired Aoi, and this wish manifested itself. If we consider it to be this case, it all makes sense.”

Koremitsu seemed more confident as he said this, but Hikaru still looked skeptical,

“W-Wait a moment, Koremitsu! If Tsuyako likes Mr Kazuaki, why did she go out with me instead?”

“That’s what we call a woman’s complicated heart. She hopes for Kazuaki, who does not care about her, to care about her, and chose to act that she is with another man. That is the same reason why she kissed me in front of Aoi!”

“A woman’s heart…you are saying this now?”

“This shows that my skill regarding how to handle women has increased thanks to you being with me 24/7.”

“Koremitsu, are you sure you have not eaten anything wrong? Like some mushroom grown in your house, or some red poppy? It really is unlike you to gleefully talk about girls like this!”

And this time, Koremitsu showed a sympathetic expression.

“Hikaru…even though you have been dating other women, senpai never showed any jealousy at all, right?”

“Hm, yes.”

“Does that not mean that you are not senpai’s true love, and that she was just fooling around with you?”

“Eh!?”

“If it is true love, there has to be something like envy, right?”

“B-but.”

“I do understand that you don’t wish to admit it. You’re called the harem prince, and you think that all the women in the world love you, but you’re actually being made use of!”

“I-Is that so…”

Hikaru still seemed a little disapproving.

“Well, being a playboy for 16 years, it’s time that you get such payback.”

“I was not born a harem prince in the first place.”

Koremitsu ignored that protest.

On this day, his mind was being very awake. The situation where he was troubled by one question after another vanished like a lie, and he felt extremely clear headed.

“No matter whether it was back then or now, senpai’s true love has always been Kazuaki. Her jealousy at Aoi has been burning, causing the appearance of Rokujō. In other words, if we can lure Aoi away from Kazuaki, everything will be settled.”

Within Koremitsu’s hands were the art gallery tickets Tōjō had given! To Aoi, who had a passion for drawing, this would be a place she would definitely like.

“Okay, Hikaru! I’m going to ask Aoi out.”

“I say, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru’s voice became stiff.

He was blabbering things like ‘it was too short-sighted’, ‘Is Tsuyako’s true love really Mr Kazuaki’? by the side. However, Koremitsu did not pay heed at all.

There was still a little time till the end of noon break. Koremitsu returned from the corridor to the connecting corridor to the school campus, advancing towards Aoi’s classroom. The normal students were taken aback, and immediately made way for him.

Koremitsu was about to reach Aoi’s classroom, and found her walking in front of him. The 5th period was probably to be held in a different classroom, as she had a textbook in her hands, her head lowered.

He hurriedly ducked into a corner at the juncture, for the one standing beside Aoi was Asai, showing a stern look.

(Damn it. I found a perfect solution here, and I forgot about that iron mask.)

With Asai around, there was no way Koremitsu could approach Asai.

Asai’s guard was beyond that of usual due to the recent irritating acts happening to Aoi.

At that moment.

A short-haired, busty, petite girl ducked through below Koremitsu.

“Please settle this within 5 minutes.”

She muttered with a mischievous, boyish tone as she rushed over to Asai and the rest.

(Oumi…!)

Koremitsu watched Hiina in shock, “Ah!” and the latter shouted as she dashed towards Asai’s group.

“This is bad–, Matriarch Asa! A delinquent from another school intruded to take on Mr Akagi for the biggest delinquent title!”

(Hey!)

Koremitsu’ fingernails were scratching at the wall at the corner. If he did not do so, he would have leapt out to retort back.

“He’s even swinging some nunchucks around, yelling ‘where is Akagi!?’. It’s dangerous.”

Asai frowned with an icy expression.

“…Aoi, go ahead first.”

However, she said this, and went off with Hiina.

“Hurry! Matriarch Asa! Over here!”

Hiina and Asai gradually went away.

Aoi looked over at where Asai departed worriedly. She had the textbooks clutched tightly to her chest; clearly she wanted to go too as she moved her slender legs about a few times. However, she lowered her head, unable to move forward from there.

“Aoi.”

“!”

Koremitsu approached Aoi from the back and talked to her. The latter was immediately taken aback, and looked back, widened her eyes, and looked flabbergasted as she remained silent.

“Are you going out with Kazuaki? Do you like him? it’s important! Tell me honestly!”

Koremitsu continued to stare at Aoi unflinchingly, saying everything he wanted to say without a greeting. He did not have time; he did not know when Asai would be back.

“We-we are not dating. I do not have such feelings either.”

Aoi was overwhelmed by Koremitsu’s pressure as she answered, her eyes rolling about.

Koremitsu lowered his shoulders, and let out a long sigh.

“Great.”

Aoi’s face immediately turned red; even the fingertips on the textbook were all red. She widened her eyes in shock, staring right at Koremitsu without wavering.

“Give me one chance, Aoi. It’s suffering to have you hate me. I’m sorry for what I did over the past few days! Please let me apologize for what happened back then.”

Koremitsu handed over the ticket Tōjō had given him.

As he had grabbed onto it tightly, the ticket was already all crumpled; he only managed to flatten it after much effort.

“There’s an art renaissance exhibition this Saturday. Let’s go together.”

Aoi looked at the ticket, her face completely red. It was like a reenactment of the scene where he handed her the theme park ticket to celebrate her birthday…

Aoi too probably remembered the same thing. Her eyes seemed to falter as she stared at the ticket.

With a groaning tone, Koremitsu said,

“Sorry, there’s no time. Tell me ‘I’m going’ before Asai comes back.”

Aoi mumbled about, and moved her lips slightly,

“I have something on…this Saturday…”

Just when Koremitsu was assuming that she could not make it.

The fingers, now dyed pink, grabbed the ticket.

“No, I will go.”

She quickly replied, and placed the ticket in front of the textbook, ostensibly treasuring it. She lowered her head, and in a bashful manner, showed a smile on her lips.

“I really like seeing an arts renaissance.”

“Really? I knew that.”

Actually, it was Tōjō who chose the tickets. However, it was fine that Aoi liked it.

Aoi was smiling away delightedly, somewhat bashful.

Having decided on the time and place to meet, Koremitsu left, barely leaving before Asai left.

“Aoi? Why are you still here? I told you to leave first. Your face is red. Are you having a fever?”

“That…may be the case.”

“Head to the infirmary then.”

He even managed to hear such a conversation.

(Phew–that was dangerous.)

Koremitsu leaned his back on the wall, heaving a sigh of relief. Having witnessed the entire scene from above, Hikaru let out a troubled sigh as he muttered,

“I do think that he has talent…but Koremitsu’s unawareness here is really terrifying. I can only pray that his talent will not blossom any further.”

Koremitsu did not know why Hikaru was being so worried, but he still sprinted off to the Japanese Dance Clubroom.

It seemed Honoka and Michiru have returned to the classroom, and Tsuyako was the only one left. She was seated in the middle of the tatamis, staring into space with an anguished, pained look, moving her lips at the same time.

(Hm? What's she saying?)

'Flutter, scatter'; Such mantras could be heard by the ear,

"The
Songs to Make the Dust Dance on the Beams."

(Eh?)

Hikaru muttered, and Koremitsu turned sidelong to find the former staring at Tsuyako in a concerned manner.

"It is an anthology of songs from the end of the Heian era...)"

(I see. So senpai's reciting a song here, huh? That's quite classy.)

"Senpai!"

Koremitsu called out. Tsuyako immediately shook her shoulders, and her stare was directed at Koremitsu.

Koremitsu then strode forth towards Tsuyako clumsily, and said,

“I sorted things out with Aoi!”

“Eh?”

Tsuyako opened her mouth slightly.

“Also, regarding that guy Kazuaki, who was with Aoi that day, it seems he doesn’t have anything to do with Aoi herself! If you’re concerned by that, why don’t you call Kazuaki out instead? In that case, you might have a chance of talking to him.”

Tsuyako seemed dumbfounded. She sat back onto the tatamis again, staring at Koremitsu without blinking.

To Koremitsu, that expression of hers seemed akin to someone shocked at being seen through.

“Be honest with your own feelings, senpai! If there’s anything you’ve accumulated in your heart, just let it all out. If you find it difficult to ask him out,

I’ll do so on your behalf.”

He placed his hands and knees on the tatamis, and lifted his eyes to the same height, clearly proclaiming as he approached her.

With a conflicted expression on his face, Hikaru seemed to have given up, probably because he assumed that it would be useless to tell Koremitsu anything.

Tsuyako’s mouth remained wide open, her eyes fixtated on Koremitsu.

“? Senpai, are you awake?”

Koremitsu asked uneasily. Suddenly, Tsuyako wrapped her arms around Koremitsu’s neck, and embraced it.

“Woah!?”

“…No, why…must you say such things…?”

Koremitsu’s body was leaned back, and a hoarse sobbing reached his ears.

The body, one of a definite mass and warm tenderness, was shivering slightly.

(I-Is she crying?)

Koremitsu’s heart shrank, his head cooling in an instant.

He was not adept at handling the tears of women, and would feel awkward about it, his thoughts ceasing, not knowing how to handle such a situation.

“Se-senpai…”

“You…really are too straightforward…I told you not to call me senpai anymore…”

A hoarse voice could be heard again. He felt a damp breath lingering in his chest, a sweet, sour fragrance pricking at his nostrils.

“Why…why did you not listen to me? If you are like this…I…”

(S-sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-she’s still crying.)

Koremitsu did not know where to place his hands, raised high in a celebratory manner. He did not know whether to embrace her tightly, to keep them high up like this, or to push her aside in a gentlemanly manner and maintain his distance from her.

(Hi-Hikaru, help me.)

There was no voice coming from behind.

He turned his neck around, and found Hikaru staring at Tsuyako with an utterly tragic face. Hikaru's hands were lowered, his back straightened as he stood upright; his deep eyes were so hollow, so filled with sadness–melancholy.

"…"

Just when Koremitsu was feeling anguish in his heart due to that expression.

Tsuyako moved her arms away from Koremitsu.

"What do I do now? I really like you, Mr Akagi."

"Like–"

Koremitsu could not say anything. Looking ready to either laugh or break down in tears, Tsuyako said to him,

"I really wish I can meet you through another way."

(She says to meet through another way…what does she mean?)

Her eyes filled with tears, Tsuyako gave a thin smile,

“Yes…I suppose…it may be a good thing to listen to your advice. I shall invite MR Kazuaki along to the recital then. I might be cursed to death by his mother however.”

SHe spoke in a jokingly manner, and stood up,

“I am really sorry for making you worry. It seems I have caused quite some trouble for both you and Miss Shikibu, Mr Akagi.”

It was unknown what kind of transformation was going on within her heart.

Or perhaps, due to the words that Koremitsu said, there was something to the ‘I wish to know you through another way’ she said.

However,

“It is alright now.”

She said with a dignified voice.

♢ ♢ ♢

It was after school, on the same day. Tsuyako was dancing about gorgeously in front of Koremitsu and the rest, her fan not dropping a single moment.

“That’s amazing, Upperclassman Tsuyako! Is that the dance to be performed for the recital?”

Honoka was clearly mesmerized as she applauded.

“Yes.”

Tsuyako showed a glowing smile to her.

“The original storyline in our traditional style is the love story between Ariwara no Narihara and the cherry blossom spirit.”

“Ariwara no Narihara is the original protagonist basis for ‘The Tales of Ise’, right? It was said that he was a noble of the Heian Period, and also an amazing playboy.”

“Yes. However, he is a multi-talented poet, an elegant prince who knows how to play. The females were all attracted to him as a result.”

The class representative with braids too spoke in ecstasy,

“Ah, I know that~. Narihara’s songs are so heartrending and sensual~. One can feel the rich emotions within it, and there’s a story to it too.”

“Upperclassman Tsuyako, you are performing the role of the cherry blossom spirit, right? Did the cherry blossom spirit fall in love with Narihara?”

Honoka asked in excitement.

“Please check out the performance. We did some really excellent setups there, you know.”

“Wow, looking forward to it.”

“M-me too.”

The anxiety that appeared on Tsuyako’s face had vanished completely, and she spoke to Honoka and Michiru with a clear expression. Koremitsu watched over them in relief.

“It really is great to let her know of Kazuaki’s relationship with Aoi.”

Koremitsu whispered softly.

“Is that so?”

Hikaru asked back in skepticism,

“Well, I guess you aren’t feeling happy here. That skinny 4-eyes is actually senpai’s true love, huh?”

“You certainly are being long-winded here, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru frowned in a peeved manner,

“It is great that Tsuyako is back to being like this however.”

And then, he reverted back to his gentle expression,

“…It’ll be great if the recital can end without a hitch.”

“If it’s the usual senpai, there’s definitely no problems.”

“…Yeah.”

It seemed Hikaru was still a little worried.

♢ ♢ ♢

The same events transpired the following day after school.

Tsuyako was so gorgeous as she danced; Honoka and Michiru were lauding her greatly.

“Ah, I can’t wait for the performance on the stage tomorrow. You’ll be going tomorrow right, Akagi?”

Koremitsu was sitting cross-legged in a corner of the clubroom, and beside him, Honoka asked as she sat with her knees cupped towards her.

“Yeah.”

“Since the opening’s in the evening, why don’t we meet up somewhere and have some tea?”

Honoka invited cheerfully, her eyes filled with anticipation, with a little tinge of anxiety by her lips.

“Sorry, got something on at noon.”

Honoka was obviously disappointed, and Koremitsu felt his heart, sweat seeping from under his armpits.

“What do you have going on?”

“None of your business, right?”

“Ev-even so, I don’t have a good feeling hearing you say that.”

“It’s normal.”

“Well, it’s nothing even if you have something going on.”

Honoka said this, her lips curled into a pout.

He wondered if he should tell her that he would be going to an art exhibition with Aoi before Tsuyako’s recital.

(I don’t think this is something I have to explain, Shikibu’s going to give a bigger scowl if it gets revealed, right?)

Koremitsu glanced at Hikaru, ostensibly hoping for an opinion,

Hikaru floated in the air, making a cross. He probably hinted that Koremitsu should not answer.

“But is it something that cannot be said?”

“Of course not.”

(Damn it, she’s being really persistent.)

Just when Koremitsu was in a pinch, Tsuyako came over to talk.

“Mr. Akagi, I wish to head home with you today.”

“EH?”

Honoka, not Koremitsu, was the one who blurted this out.

Looking apologetic, Tsuyako clapped her hands together and said to Honoka,

“I do apologize here, Miss Shikibu. Let me borrow Mr. Akagi for the day.”

“N-No-no-no-no-no problems here. There’s no need to ask for my permission! Akagi and I are just classmates here! Go ahead with it! Use him however you

want to, whether it is to carry your stuff or be a bodyguard!”

She rattled off, her face completely red.

Tsuyako let out a giggle, and chuckled,

“Thank you.”

(Are my wishes being disregarded here?)

Koremitsu was unhappy, but he remained silent as he felt it had something to do with Tsuyako’s loneliness.

Tsuyako had told Koremitsu that she wished to change clothing, so the latter went to the corridor and stood upright there; Honoka approached him from the front, her lips pouted, her eyes fixated at him, and she whispered,

“…Y-you mustn’t kiss upperclassman Tsuyako, okay?”

And after saying that, she teetered off, her cheeks red.

“Wh-what nonsense is that? Of course I won’t.”

Koremitsu too grumbled, his face red.

He waited for Tsuyako with his back leaning on the corridor wall, his face burning. The sunset outside the window was dyed a reddish-black.

(How am I supposed to endure a second time of this…that Shikibu really worries too much..)

Hikaru cheerfully chimes in,

“Koremitsu, looking at how red your face is, Tsuyako might think you have the hots for her.”

“I-it’s because of the sunset.”

“Your voice is becoming shrill.”

“You’re thinking too much!”

Koremitsu turned his head aside as he declared so softly. Hikaru chuckled in amusement, and he showed a sweet stare of melancholy.

“Tsuyako would often ask me out on the night before her recitals…a spell that would allow her to perform well.”

“A spell…?”

What did he mean?

And so, Tsuyako appeared.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Akagi.”

“It’s fine.”

Her hair, tied in a bundle during practice, was left scattered. The dry, glossy hair that stretched down to the shoulders were slightly curled, swaying alluringly along with her movements.

She narrowed her eyes that were surrounded by thin, long eyelashes, and opened the soft, feminine lips slightly, smiling at Koremitsu,

He was probably anxious due to what Honoka had said.

Tsuyako looked more serene and mature than usual, causing Koremitsu’s heart to race.

–You mustn’t kiss

The sight of Honoka pouting her lips echoed in his mind.

(I won't!)

"What is the matter?"

"…It's nothing."

"Then, let us depart."

"Okay."

Koremitsu and Tsuyako walked sidelong with each other through the school campus that had been graced by the impending night.

He felt that Tsuyako did not give off the vibe of tender love he felt from Yū, nor did she give off the urge to be protected like Aoi.

Even so, Koremitsu's heart was racing, his palms sweaty as he watched her red hair sway, her slender, white neck, her glittering eyes; it must have been because she was truly alluring.

He never experienced a woman's charm before meeting Hikaru. Even after seeing a flower bloom, his feelings were straightforward, merely thinking, "Ah,

it’s a flower”.

But once he was with Hikaru, he would listen in on floral knowledge every single day, and after interacting with the gender call female; his sexuality was gradually being cultivated.

Was that a good thing, or a bad thing?

“Mr Akagi, you were in quite a tight spot when Miss Shikibu asked ‘where are you going tomorrow’, am I correct?”

“Ugh–a little there.”

“You are going out on a date with Miss Aoi, right?”

She went straight to the point with a gentle, clear voice, leaving Koremitsu speechless.

She descended the stairs elegantly, and giggled,

“Am I right?”

“…”

“Relax. I will keep this a secret from Miss Shikibu.”

“Ugh.”

“To where will you be going with Miss Aoi?”

“Th-the art exhibition.”

“Is that so? Miss Aoi really likes paintings.”

Koremitsu’s face was red and green all over, his voice shrill, looking really strange. With a smile, Tsuyako continued the topic about the date.

Where will they meet? There are a lot of people at the station; a cute cafe or an illustration bookshop at a book center would suit her tastes better, no? Try going to such places the next time? If they are to meet at that time, what is their schedule after that? Have they decided on which restaurant to meet?

Koremitsu cringed, sweat dripping in masses as he answered Tsuyako’s questions.

(Is senpai asking me to go home with her so that she can tease me…)

He had such a doubt.

Tsuyako tilted her face aside, and stared over at Koremitsu’s face.

“Just kidding there. Am I being too nosy? Mr Akagi, it seems you are very used to going out on dates with girls.”

“HUH!?”

“You were quite an outstanding escort when you brought me to the tropical park. I was so shocked I was thinking ‘that is a surprise’.”

“Th-that’s–“

Just when Koremitsu was panicking, Tsuyako muttered with a gentle voice,

“It feels as if I was with Hikaru himself…”

Once he felt the friction in his heart, Koremitsu murmured,

“It’s because that Hikaru got nosy and taught me lots of things.”

“…Is that so?”

There was a warm sense of loneliness appearing in Tsuyako’s eyes.

Hikaru too showed the same expression at her.

“Hikaru really is a great teacher.”

She spoke cheerfully, causing Koremitsu to heave a sigh of relief,

“Well, I guess.”

They were walking down the dirt track by the river, in the opposite direction of the usual. The air color became that of a blue hue, signifying the beginning of night.

Both of them took a turn there, and went through a narrow alley in the residential area.

(This path…leads to Yū’s apartment.)

The old dilapidated building that was still in disrepair.

There lived a dreamy girl wrapped in a blanket, living her days peacefully like a white moonflower.

But Yū was no longer in that room.

The memories of the rock sugar sweetness in Koremitsu’s mouth was reawakened within him together with the wrenching pain, and he showed a serious look,

(Is Yū doing alright over there…?)

Koremitsu never sent any messages or phone calls there, and Yū never did send any messages on her side either.

For this was the proof that both Koremitsu and Yū were doing their bests on their parts.

–When we meet the next time, I’ll show that I’ve become a girl who likes to smile.

It was a little wish, not even a promise.

That was a fantastical vow.

One of those days, those words would be fulfilled.

Soon after, they arrived at the unforgettable park.

The last time he came, the Hydrageas and Irises were in full bloom amidst the rain. This time, the pure land was covered in blue and purple, with some bright colored tropical flowers, like the cute reddish-orange Anomathecas, gentle orange Trumpet Vines growing from the vines, and the red Cannas embracing the outdoor lights and the moon.

“How about we have a chat?”

On Tsuyako’s invitation, both of them sat on the bench, side by side.

Koremitsu recalled the matter of him bidding farewell to Yū on this bench, and his heart gripped again.

Tsuyako probably had memories of Hikaru at this park too.

She seemed to be seeking Hikaru’s shadow, and she scanned past the fence covered by the Trumpet Vines, the Common Cattails and Winged Lythrums growing on the lake, the flower beds of yellow Japanese Irises and red, orange

Portulacas, her eyes moistening.

Hikaru too–

He was staring gently at the flowers and the tightly shut buds with a lonely expression of melancholy.

During that time, they remained in their silence for quite a while.

“…”

“…”

“…”

The residential area was so quiet, vehicles could not be heard; there was no wind, and the warm air engulfed the trio.

Tsuyako was the first to speak up,

“Mr Akagi…did you feel lonely after Hikaru died?”

The hoarse voice reverberated deep within Koremitsu’s ears.

“I…”

He only became friends with Hikaru after the latter had died and became a ghost.

Thus, he did not feel any sadness when he heard the commotion his turmoil his classmates went through about hearing of Hikaru’s accidental death.

Even at the funeral, where women were sobbing, he felt numb inside.

“I don’t know at all…it was too sudden…I was shocked.”

He could not lie to hide his feelings, and could only mutter the feelings he felt back then.

Tsuyako in turn uttered back,

“…Is that so?”

She lowered her long eyelashes.

“I did not feel shocked. Ah…of course…that was what I felt.”

She muttered these words bit by bit, her voice showing a helpless anguish.

Till this point, Tsuyako probably assumed that Hikaru had committed suicide.

“Everything is all blank…whether it is my mind, or my heart…I felt lonely.”

Hikaru’s white face was full of sadness, helpless anguish and misery.

The hair was dyed a golden hair due to absorbing the moonlight, draped upon the pale face, swaying in limbo.

Tsuyako had her head lowered, clenching her fists tightly on the knees.

“After Hikaru was gone, I became lonely…so lonely…it was unbearable.”

As long as he was alive.

As long as he existed somewhere on this Earth.

This was what Tsuyako had said.

Even till this point, Hikaru was on this planet, standing right beside Tsuyako, giving her an anguished, transparent look.

But Tsuyako could not see that figure.

Hikaru could not erase Tsuyako’s loneliness.

And Koremitsu felt an anguish wrenching his heart.

“I am still afraid…can I really dance on the stage tomorrow? Will I drop the fan? Will I stand in the middle of the stage with my head blank?”

Her shoulders were shivering.

Perhaps she was keeping a cheerful facade in the clubroom, and was truly anxious within.

Tsuyako liked Kazuaki, and Hikaru was just someone she fooled around with–yet Hikaru was also her emotional support.

(Damn it. What can I do to fulfill Hikaru’s promise?)

Even if the now deceased Hikaru was to watch the stage in the audience, it would be meaningless if Tsuyako could not sense him. No matter how Koremitsu hollered saying “Hikaru’s still here! He’s still worried and watching over you,

senpai!” those words would seem to be mere condolences.

(Is there nothing I can do here?)

“Before I ascend the stage, Hikaru…would often cast a spell on me. He would hold me gently by the hand, draw a circle on my palm, and mutter a few words, “the light shall always glitter upon you. You shall attract the crowds like the red weeping cherry blossoms basking under the moonlight–“

She clenched his fists that were resting on the knees, the fingernails entrenched into the flesh.

Koremitsu grabbed a hand, and peeled the finger one at a tail.

Tsuyako instinctively lifted her head, and watched Koremitsu’s actions quietly.

The pink fingers were long and pretty; Koremitsu was frowning hard, trying his best to pry over the feminine fingers with his thick, clumsy fingers.

And after prying the 5 fingers to reveal a silky palm, he drew a little circle on it with his index finger.

Hikaru watched this scene with a quiet, lonely expression. After Koremitsu finished drawing the circle, he squeezed his eyes shut to endure his overflowing emotions.

“You definitely can do it.”

He continued to grasp her head, his scalding face becoming tense as he raised his eyebrows, widened his eyes and tried his best to express his wish.

“Senpai, you’ll be the one who’ll move the audience most tomorrow. I’ll watch in the audience with my eyes wide, in place of Hikaru.”

Tsuyako could continue to dance.

That was Hikaru’s wish

So, no matter what,

Her eyes teary, Tsuyako stared at Koremitsu, almost breaking into tears as she murmured with trembling lips,

“…You really…are unpredictable.”

And so, she gave a slight smile.

“Thank you.”

She clenched the fist lightly with the drawn full moon lightly, and placed it on her ample breasts.

“Hikaru must have felt that it was good to have you as his friend, Mr Akagi. Your existence must have been a powerful support to him. Even if it was a while, it is great for Hikaru to have such a friend…”

Her murmur was full of warmth, and Hikaru’s response upon hearing it was to show a slight dreamy smile.

Both Tsuyako and Hikaru were lovers the world would never permit, and they showed the smiles at the same time, like it was a literal snapshot.

“I do feel hungry so suddenly. There is a shop selling chilli dogs at the entrance opposite the park. Hikaru and I ate it before…the sauce is a little too sweet, it is still delicious. Can you buy one for me?”

It seemed Tsuyako wanted to weep alone.

Koremitsu thought as he saw her try her best to widen her soaked eyes.

“…Got it. Any flavors you want?”

“Your choice.”

Tsuyako was barely able to maintain a smile on her lips.

Koremitsu turned away and ran off.

By the time Koremitsu returned with a bag of chili dogs, pork beans and cola in his hands, Tsuyako's eyes were all red, the tear marks still remaining on her face.

He pretended not to notice, sat on the bench, and started eating the chili dog.

He had requested for the spiciest flavor for his portion, and upon eating it, found it to be really spicy that his nostrils were agitated, and he was nearly breaking down in tears.

"It is…delicious."

Tsuyako looked rather cheerful as she ate her chili dog, but still felt somewhat lonely.

"Mr Akagi…will you really come by?"

"Definitely. It's a promise."

"Then…I have to dance well…"

Tsuyako spoke with a gentle voice, and Hikaru, standing by the bench, watched on sadly, his expression faltering.

Suddenly, Hikaru exclaimed,

“Tsuyako! I will be watching! I shall be in the audience, watching you dance!”

Tsuyako did not hear the voice.

The words could not be conveyed.

But even so, Hikaru was yelling hard, ostensibly unable to hold in his emotions.

Tsuyako’s eyes were staring into the distance again.

Those eyes were staring at the moon the hands could not reach.

With a spicy feeling, Koremitsu heard Hikaru’s voice vanish gradually into the summer air.

Hikaru closed his lips tightly, standing by sadly.

The moon was partially shrouded by the clouds, shining dimly and quietly onto

the park in the night; it was very likely the trio was lonely.

Chapter 8

The following day was a Saturday.

Koremitsu was tying the laces of his sneakers, and Shioriko, holding Lapis in her arms, looked devastated as she approached him.

“You’re going out again, Big Brother? I thought I could be with you today.”

Recently, Koremitsu had been really busy over the matters regarding Tsuyako and Aoi, and he did not spend time with Shioriko even at home. He felt a pricking pain in his heart, probably sensing that he had made her lonely.

“I’ll play with you tomorrow.”

Koremitsu hurriedly said. Shioriko then covered Lapis white fur over half of her face, and said pitifully,

“But…we can be together today. Can’t I go out with you…? I’ll be obedient.”

“Th-That won’t do. I’ll be with you the whole day tomorrow, Shiiko. Play around with Lapis for today. Gramps will be happy if you play 5-in-a-row with him.”

“…Hm.”

Shioriko lowered her eyes, looking utterly devastated, and this caused the pain within Koremitsu to pronounce itself. With a reluctant feeling, he opened the doors leading to corridor.

“Koremitsu, look back for a while.”

Hikaru whispered softly at Koremitsu’s ears with amusement.

Koremitsu turned his head behind, and found that Shioriko, who had her eyes lowered gently just a while ago, was making a funny face like a mischievous child, gritting her teeth, ‘ii–‘ and making such a sound.

She probably never expected Koremitsu to look back.

Once their eyes met, her face reddened in an instant.

“Idiot!”

She yelled, and teetered off to the inside.

Koremitsu was flabbergasted.

Hikaru was chuckling away, seeming thinking that this was unbelievably cute.

“No matter how young a girl is, she probably has all sorts of thoughts about boys in her mind. The impishness Shiiko showed at the end was really cute though.”

“That devastated look she showed before was an act…women are really…”

Upon thinking about the future, Koremitsu felt a chill on his back.

“I do think it is true that Shiiko feels lonely because you ignored her, big brother.”

“Don’t call me big brother there…alright, I’ll accompany her tomorrow.”

Koremitsu grumbled, scowling to hide his embarrassment.

He had agreed to meet Aoi at 11am, at the train station nearest to the art museum.

Miss Aoi will arrive 10 minutes earlier;
as Hikaru had said this, Koremitsu arrived 15 minutes earlier.

But even once the appointed time had passed, Aoi did not show up.

“That is strange. Koremitsu, try calling Miss Aoi.”

“I say, if I’m going to call her at exactly the time we’re supposed to meet, I’m no different from a super psychotic guy now, right? Also, aren’t you proud of how you waited six hours for a girl?”

“That is another girl here. Miss Aoi is a serious person and will definitely not be late. Do this for precaution, please?”

“You guys are really overprotective of her.”

Koremitsu grumbled, but as he too was a little concerned. He tried calling her on the phone.

The message he got was that the phone was either not in the service area, or the number could not be reached.

“She’s probably on the train.”

“It’s good if that’s the case…”

Hikaru’s expression was getting more anxious by the moment.

15 minutes passed, and Aoi had yet to turn up.

And then, 20, 30 minutes have passed.

During that time, Koremitsu had called her 7 times, and every single time, there was a caller’s response of the call being unable to pass through.

Even Koremitsu’s face was becoming tense by the minute.

(Did something really happen to Aoi?)

What do I do? Do I go check out Aoi’s house? But this is different from the theme park date. We won’t meet if she’s coming here.

“Damn it. Got to contact her again.”

Just when Koremitsu wanted to call Aoi’s number again, the cellphone in his hand vibrated.

(Is it Aoi?)

It was a private number, but Koremitsu hastily picked up the call.

The voice that reached his ear however was as stone cold as ice.

“Where are you?”

This sudden question came without an introduction.

Feeling incensed, Koremitsu let out a peeved voice,

“How do you know my number, Asai Saiga?”

Upon hearing Koremitsu’s words, Asai Saiga replied back with more anxiety,

“There is no need for me to answer that question, I feel. Which aquarium are you at? Is Aoi with you?”

“Huh? Aquarium? What are you saying?”

“I heard that Aoi told her servants that she is going to the Aquarium, that the art museum is temporarily closed due to renovation works, so you switched locations. I also learned that you sent a message the previous day.”

“A message!?”

Koremitsu hung up on Asai, and hurriedly checked through his mailbox.

Hikaru too looked on grimly from the side.

Both of them stared at the small screen, their faces nearly touching each other. It seemed Koremitsu did not have anyone to send messages to.

And thus, he spotted a message he did not remember sending.

The title was ‘A change of meeting location’–

And the recipient was Aoi!

(What’s going on…?)

He held his breath, and read the contents of the message.

The message signal was flickering from time to time; it seemed Asai was furiously trying to call back, but Koremitsu was not in the mood to be bothered by her.

“It seems the art museum is currently closed due to renovation works.

How about we go to the Aquarium instead?”

There was also the location and time after this passage.

(I don’t remember sending such a message before.)

Koremitsu checked through the inbox, but did not see Aoi’s reply.

“Koremitsu, Miss Aoi probably went to that place.”

“Damn it. It’ll take almost an hour for us to get there by train.”

Koremitsu ran through the gantry gates, and barely managed to get on the train that was about to start moving.

He wanted to get over to the written location as quickly as possible.

He felt his gut nearly splinter as he rode on the train. The other passengers had moved aside due to this savage-looking youth gritting his teeth, his temples pulsating, and there was a wide space around him.

His dry eyes were flaring, and all he saw was the time the mail was sent, 7pm the previous day.

What was he doing at that time?

Who was he with

Once Koremitsu recalled this, he grasped his cellphone firmly, nearly crushing it to bits.

“…”

He finally made it through the gantry on the concourse.

As there was a lot of people at the station, it was tough for him to move about without knocking into anyone. He and Hikaru split up to look for Aoi, but to no avail.

He took his cellphone, and dialled Aoi’s number again.

Get through!

With such a wishful feeling, Koremitsu waited, only to be met by the voicemail again.

During this time, the messages from Asai probably kept increasing.

The cellphone vibrated again.

And Koremitsu picked up the phone, saying,

“Aoi’s missing! Senpai probably knows something here. I’m going over to her now. Come along!”

◇ ◇ ◇

Tsuyako was already at the rest lounge of the recital venue.

By the time Koremitsu arrived, she was dressed only in white undergarments, an alluring sight at that, and looked over at him with hazy eyes.

“Senpai…you sent Aoi the message using my cellphone, right? When I went to get the chili dog, you took my cellphone from my bag.”

Koremitsu asked, his teeth gritting.

Beside him, Hikaru’s face was frozen in bitterness.

If possible, they hoped that was not the case.

But at the time the message was sent to Aoi, Tsuyako was the only one who was with Koremitsu at the park at that time, and the only possible person who could

have sent that message.

Tsuyako nonchalantly replied,

“Yes…Miss Aoi immediately replied, and I deleted that immediately.”

The thin undergarments wrapped around Tsuyako was just like a mourning gown, and she stared at Koremitsu with those lifeless pair of eyes.

Koremitsu then clenched his fists,

“Why must you do such a thing?”

“…After Hikaru died, I felt very lonely, and I vented on Miss Aoi as my frustration. In the end, Hikaru chose her, and abandoned me.”

The determined, alluring Tsuyako was gradually vanishing in front of Koremitsu’s sights.

The silhouette that took the shape of Tsuyako was gradually becoming blurred, disintegrating into a weak, ambiguous line.

(So senpai likes Hikaru and not Kazauki? is she unable to forgive Hikaru for breaking up for Aoi’s sake?)

Did she do such a thing because she was jealous of Aoi, because she hated Aoi?

Koremitsu felt his mind being pierced through hard. Lots of things, words, voices were jumbled up, echoing within him.

However.

“That is not the case.”

Amidst the chaos, a singular voice rang with clarity.

“That is not the case, Tsuyako.”

The straightforward eyes were staring right at Tsuyako.

Hikaru’s eyes were looking at Tsuyako.

The eyes, the voice; thanks to them, Koremitsu too realized–

Tsuyako’s lie. Tsuyako’s true thoughts.

Koremitsu too exclaimed.

“That’s not the case! If you’re jealous of Aoi, instead of that, why did you leave this message after sending it in my name? Say it!!”

The hazy expression Tsuyako showed was infused with a little spark of emotion at that instant. That was true fear.

There was a heartwrenching feeling.

(Ahh, that’s how it is, senpai?)

“You do not wish for others to realize, right?”

Hikaru asked in a tragic tone.

“You don’t know me to find out right, senpai?”

With such suffocating pain, Koremitsu yelled,

“IF NOT, WHY MUST YOU GO ABOUT DOING THINGS IN A ROUNDABOUT WAY!?”

After sending the message, she could have deleted it with just a little finger.

However, she did not do so.

She left it behind.

She knew that if Koremitsu was to find out, she would be the first suspect!

Hikaru stared at Tsuyako with a condoling expression, his voice reaching Koremitsu’s ears as he guided the latter to the truth,

“I was mistaken. It looked as if you were terrified of the blood of Rokujō that was inside you. You did not deny that either. However, that was not the case! What you fear is not the embodiment of the spider inside you, the fear of Rokujō. Because that is not you!”

“Senpai, you’ve always been scared of Rokujō, right? You’re scared that you’ll be like her, hurting others out of jealousy. You’re scared that you’ll ruin Hikaru’s precious flowers. However, you never did those things!”

Tsuyako’s eyes were gradually showing emotions. Pain, bitterness anguish–

She knelt weakly upon the tatamis, her body cringed as she lifted her head, staring at Koremitsu.

“After the flowers were plucked off, your palms and fingers were still so pretty. There was no traces of nectar, and no marks at all.”

On the night of the garden party.

Tsuyako was standing in the midst of the ripped flowers, but the hands that clasped Koremitsu's face and pulled him in were so white, tender, beautiful, speckless, and there was an icy feeling to the touch.

When she told Koremitsu of Rokujō's name, her clothes and hair were ruffled, her eyes dangerous, and though there were many red flowers scattered everywhere, Tsuyako's hands were pure and pretty.

Koremitsu grabbed Tsuyako's hand and raised it.

Tsuyako trembled.

"Senpai, your hands have always been clean! I don't see any signs of you pulling the flowers out!"

"The black-haired Rokujō you so fear is someone else. That Rokujō is the one ordering you! You are a prisoner of Rokujō, meant to hunt prey down! Tsuyako, you, are, not, Rokujō!"

"You're not Rokujō, senpai!"

Tsuyako’s face had turned completely pale. The eyes as hazy as the shrouded moon were gradually showing signs of life again.

At the same time, the fear that was sealed away when she shut her heart was probably striking her again.

She embraced her body tightly, starting to tremble.

Hikaru knelt down in front of her.

He lifted his head politely at her, like a knight saving a princess, and started to say with a serious look,

“Now that I think about it, you have been sending out warning signals, right? ‘Rokujō’ has been sealing you, but you tried to struggle from within, trying to send a message to us.”

She said to Koremitsu before ‘
Can you please keep watch on me so that I do not destroy them?’

She indicated that she was jealous of Aoi, hoping that Koremitsu and the rest would focus their attentions on her, so that they could protect her.

She taunted him, ‘are you able to stop
Rokujō?’, sobbing, ‘there is no way to stop Rokujō. Do not get involved with me

anymore.’ All those were the most Tsuyako could do to resist.

“I am sorry for realizing it so late! I have noticed it now! I can be your strength!”

Koremitsu grabbed Tsuyako’s hand, overlapping with Hikaru’s white, slender hand

However, that hand of Hikaru was unable to grab Tsuyako’s hand.

So Koremitsu took his place and held it hand.

As the only person present who could continue to express Hikaru’s will.

“You wanted to give us such notices, right, senpai? Tell me! Who’s Rokujō!? Where’s Aoi?”

Tsuyako lowered her head in trepidation. She wanted to lift her head, but shook her head intently again, and closed the lips that she wished to open.

She was so bounded by the fear of Rokujō, she was unable to let out a single voice.

“Tsuyako, you should be a firm-willed person, a bold, dignified person. You do remember the time when you were expelled from the English boarding school, right? At that time, did you not boldly proclaim to the teachers, introducing me

as your lover? That was really amazing!”

“Senpai, you’re someone even Hikaru has fallen for! The most beautiful, dignified red weeping cherry blossom! You shouldn’t be a timid person! Hikaru said that you’re a daring woman! That you were amazing when you were expelled from the English boarding school!”

From deep within her throat, Tsuyako eked a voice,

“But, Hikaru is no longer around…so–“

“As Hikaru’s representative, I’ll assure you that Rokujō’s vengeance can be severed! I’ll break it for you!!”

Koremitsu grabbed Tsuyako’s hand tightly, and swore this with all his might, causing his body to heat up. Hikaru too was looking at Tsuyako with an earnest, prayerful look.

‘I’ll protect you, senpai!”

Tsuyako’s shoulder jerked again.

With a troubled expression, she lifted her face at Koremitsu again.

And Koremitsu glared back at her, ostensibly absorbing her eyes in.

“Trust me!”

She lowered her eyes, opened her lips a few times again–her eyebrows were trembling as she spoke of Rokujō’s true identity and Aoi’s whereabouts with a voice so small if felt it would vanish.

Hikaru’s voice became gloomy as a result.

“Got it.”

Koremitsu gently placed Tsuyako’s hand on the knee.

And then,

“I’ll be back before you appear, senpai! Leave it to me!”

He dashed out from the rest room.

Hikaru too moved along with a serious look.

At the entrance, they nearly bumped into Asai.

It seemed Asai had just overheard their words, and was scowling hard. Koremitsu did not give time for her to say anything as he snapped,

“Come with me! Asai Saiga!”

♢ ♢ ♢

“Where is Mr. Akagi?”

Aoi asked warily.

The room was filled with a bright colored table, a sofa, exotic paintings and pots. The carpet no taller than the ankle was neat and glossy, and there was nary a speck of trash.

It did not seem to be a place for the wounded to be sent to.

–Mr. Akagi has an accident. He is currently undergoing treatment.

Aoi suddenly heard these words when she was waiting for Koremitsu, and in shock, got on the car.

However, after riding for a long time, she did not arrive at a hospital, but what seemed like a rural resort.

–Alright, come in then. For some reasons, we cannot send him into the hospital. We have called in a doctor to carry out treatment, so please relax.

The person spoke with a rich, sweet voice. With a gloomy feeling, Aoi entered through the door.

However, it was still too weird.

The building was too quiet within, and there was no presence of humans to be felt. There was something slightly sweet being burned drifting in the air, giving her a nauseous feeling.

“Please let me see Mr. Akagi.”

This time, Aoi spoke with a harsher tone than before.

“Do not be anxious Aoi. Mr. Akagi has just underwent treatment, and is currently sleeping due to the anaesthetic, so let him rest for a while. I shall go brew some tea; please have a seat.”

The other party gave such an excuse, and there was only one person left in the room.

Aoi did not intend to sit on the sofa; the anxiety and doubt started to intensify, her skin feeling prickly as well.

(Is Mr. Akagi really here?)

It was already abnormal that he could not be sent to the hospital.

(And also, why does he know of where Mr. Akagi and I are supposed to meet?)

He said that he was to convey Mr. Akagi’s words to her, but if she were to think about it, it was unnatural.

Aoi tried calling Koremitsu on the phone, but after rummaging through the bag, could not find her cellphone.

(I did bring it when I went out.)

Suddenly, Aoi felt goosebumps near her neck.

(Was it taken away? When he talked to me at the station, and took my belongings onto the car…?)

Though she had said that ‘I do not need help to carry my things’, and wanted it back immediately, at that moment…

Aoi’s heart was racing wildly, her heart breaking down, unable to make up her mind. The slight fragrance engulfing her nostrils caused the throat to be prickly, and her thoughts seemed blurry at that time.

(What is this fragrance…)

It came from the door at the side.

Aoi placed the hand at the handle, opened the door wide, and the sweet smoke came out immediately, causing her to cough softly.

Her eyes were teary, her head dizzy.

However, when she spotted a painting in an extravagant frame on the other end, she felt shocked, as if she was doused with ice-cold water.

(That painting–!)

That was a painting of Hikaru standing on the school staircase, whilst the bright sun was shining inside, looking back and smiling.

Aoi had decided on this image as she tried drawing him, but she could not draw well as she hardly drew human profiles.

Hikaru’s nose was not like that.

His eyes should be clearer.

His smile should be sweeter, gentler.

She drew a little, and was troubled; she repeated this process over and over again, and finally,
if it is this painting, I might be able to show it to Mr. Akagi
, she thought.

(That painting was supposed to be missing!)

Asai gave lots of reasons stating that the painting was missing, but Aoi noticed that she was lying. The thief was probably the same person who stole her gym uniform, her textbook, and placed the wilted flower in the shoe locker.

She stumbled about as she entered the room.

She was engulfed in white smoke, the faint looming fragrance was causing her to be dizzy, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

There was a large mirror on the right, and a transparent cage on the rack beside it. There was a chameleon with green scales, hissing its long tongue out.

There was a crimson ceramic stove on the floor; the smoke was coming out from it.

The bed was covered in a bright red cover, as red as poppies, and the painting was at the wall by the side, covered in a golden frame.

Aoi was uncomfortable and hesitant as to whether she was to climb onto the bed, or to touch the bed; thus, she stood by the side, lifting her head to look at the painting.

(That…is my painting after all.)

And that was not all.

The familiar looking palette, brushes, gym clothes and textbooks were thrown into the trashbin. Upon seeing this, Aoi felt chilly.

(Is Miss Tsuyako not the one who did such annoying acts? But she hated me ever since we were young; she plucked out the Tulip buds Hikaru and I grew together, and placed a dead rat at my window.)

Aoi also recalled that Tsuyako had a scandal with Hikaru, for Hikaru was Aoi’s fiance.

She was hated by Tsuyako to such an extent.

Originally, the Udates and the Saotomes were competing families surrounding the Mikados, supporting each other as relatives, and opposing each other discreetly in the shadows. This was the unique relationship the two families had.

Thus, Aoi had assumed that even if Tsuyako was unhappy with her, that was something that could not be helped.

When Hikaru was alive, there were girls other than Tsuyako, girls whose names Aoi did not know of, who did such annoying acts.

To them, it was useless even if she got angry or hurt by them.

The only thing Aoi could do was to despise them.

It was a coping mechanism she learnt, growing up in an elite environment where she was envied by others all the time.

(But, Miss Tsuyako was not the one who did it.)

The one who stole Hikaru’s painting was–

“That painting was really well done…”

“!”

The rich, sweet voice cause Aoi to freeze.

She turned around, and found a slender, bespectacled youth holding a tray of red teacups. Hikaru’s older brother, Kazuaki Mikado, stood there.

His thin lips showed a gentle smile.

That ordinary looking youth, or so he was described as, seemed to have become another creature altogether amidst the swaying milky steam.

“You have been watching Hikaru all this time, Aoi. You really like him most.”

That creature was slowly approaching her.

The chameleon slithered its long tongue in the rectangular cage.

“It looks to be incomplete however. I will be delighted if you can continue doing so, Aoi.”

While the voice seemed as sweet and gentle as Hikaru’s, the face was anything but; it was like a serpent, an ominous face and lips giving off such a voice.

(Who is this person?)

It definitely was not the polite, bumbling, goody, ordinary Kazuaki Mikado Aoi knew of.

“Hey, Aoi. Why are you trembling? You look pale.”

He took a small step forward.

Aoi cringed back, and glared.

“Please do not approach me. You are the one who stole that painting, right, Mr. Kazuaki? Not only the painting too; everything else as well–also, what you said about Mr. Akagi being hurt, that he was sent to this house, it was all a lie, right? You lied to me, and brought me to this place. What do you want to do? Return me my phone right now! I am calling for a car to fetch me.”

Kazuaki again showed a smile from behind the smoke.

His beady eyes were showing a condescending look.

He lowered his body as he held the tray, and said softly to the chameleon slithering its tongue in the cage.

“Eh, Third Princess, Aoi here is angry. That is strange? Why must I be scolded by her?”

“Please do not joke around. Think about what you did and reflect upon them.”

The smoke was seeping into her throat, and her head was dizzy, her legs unable to exert strength. Her knees probably would have buckled if she was not angry.

(I cannot continue to inhale this fragrance.)

Sensing danger, Aoi tried to leave the room, but Kazuaki put the tray down, and blocked the door.

“You still do not understand, Aoi.”

With a smirk, Kazuaki gently spoke.

The eyes looking down at Aoi were gradually becoming icy too.

“You were the one who did grievous things to me, Aoi. Cancelling the promise you made with me at the last minute, and wanting to go on an art exhibition with Mr. Akagi.”

“Th-that.”

Kazuaki stared at Aoi with an icy look, gradually approaching her.

Aoi backed away.

The smoke was spreading bewitchingly, and the chilling uneasiness and fear struck Aoi amidst all these.

After being invited to the art exhibition with Koremitsu, she cancelled the appointment with Kazuaki to go to the classical music concert, saying ‘I cannot go as there is something at school…sorry’. That was a fact.

The guilt was pricking her chest, she wanted to patch things up with Koremitsu no matter what.

At that time, Kazuaki politely smiled, saying, “If it is a school matter, I guess there is no other choice.”

However, this Kazuaki that appeared in front of Aoi was one that inspired fear and trepidation; the demonic smile was closing in.

“Hey, Third Princess, Aoi has been acting like she is a pure innocent girl with a cute face, but managed to hurt someone else so easily. It is scary. Annoying.”

Aoi backed away little by litle.

Once the heel touched the wall, her heart chilled.

There was a bed with bright red covers by her side. Beside the bed was a golden-framed portrait of Hikaru gently smiling.

To prevent Aoi from retreating, Kazuaki pressed his hands on the wall. His flat face was right above hers.

The uneasiness and fear caused Aoi’s petite body to tremble.

“This is not the only time, you know? Back then,
you rejected me
, Aoi.”

The warmth in Kazuaki’s eyes was diluting. To Aoi, frigid air was even seeping from his body.

“You were the first choice for my fiancee back then, Aoi. However, it was said that Hikaru would be a better choice, and your father, who really doted on you,

used the reason of you wanting to marry Hikaru to reject my mother’s proposal.

–Aoi, if Mr. Kazuaki’s mother wishes for you to be her daughter-in-law, what will you do?

That was when Aoi started her elementary school life.

Her father placed her on his lap, asking this.

–It seems young Hikaru’s father wishes for you to be Hikaru’s bride. Who do you wish to marry, Mr. Kazuaki, or Hikaru?

At that time, Aoi was still young, and she did not know how massive a power the Mikados was, what relationship her family clan had with the Mikados, and how they intended to get along in the future.

But even so, she was about to tell from her father’s tone that her reply would affect Hikaru’s position in the future.

Hikaru was the child of a mistress.

There were a few times where she heard of the adults murmurings, saying that Hikaru was ‘a child that should not have been born’, that normally, Hikaru was an entity who could not even step into the Mikados household.

But if Aoi was to marry Hikaru, Hikaru would have the Saotomes backing him.

With such expectations, Hikaru’s father unofficially tried seeking the possibility of Hikaru marrying Aoi

The daughter of the Udates and the daughter of the Saotomes were meant to marry the Mikados’ heirs.

According to the conditions of Aoi’s marriage, everyone would have to recognize Hikaru as a child of the Mikados, and Hikaru could be protected under the Mikados’ name.

Aoi did not understand this much.

But even so, if he gets engaged with me, Hikaru might not be called a child ‘who should not be born’.

That was what Aoi thought.

I want to protect Hikaru.

Thus, with her cheeks red, she pouted her lips in a seemingly angry manner, stealthily whispering her answer with her all might.

–If I am to get married to Hikaru, I can continue to play with Asa…I will choose Hikaru then.

The engagement was decided by the two fathers.

That was what everyone else said.

In fact, it was an unavoidable fate for her as the eldest daughter of the Saotomes main family to marry either Hikaru or Kazuaki.

However, Aoi herself was the one who chose Hikaru from the two.

It had been 10 years since that incident, and being chided by Kazuaki over this matter had caused Aoi to be confused.

Up till this point, Kazuaki had been interacting with Aoi as an elder, though unreliable older brother; they had never held such a conversation once.

However, he probably felt vengeful over Aoi’s refusal to be engaged to him.

For 10 years!

Behind that smile!

With an icy stare of disgust and condescendence, Kazuaki glared at Aoi, curling his lips demonically as he smiled.

With a rich, sweet voice, he said,

“Ever since then, Aoi, you are the one I really hated most in this world.”

At that moment, it seemed that even the breath Kazuaki let out was frozen. The numbing fear passed through her back, causing her limbs to become numb, her throat dry, her breathing ceasing. She felt as if her heart was grasped by a venomous claw, causing her to nearly shriek.

Till this point, she had been envied by others.

There were girls who liked Hikaru, heaving verbal abuse upon hear before.

However, those paled in comparison; he was showing him such filth, distorted malice and hatred, causing her to tremble.

“However, you are Hikaru’s most precious girl. I shall treasure you well.”

Kazuaki’s hand gently caressed Aoi’s face.

The hand, as damp as a fish’s fin, brought a sensation that caused goosebumps to rise on Aoi’s skin again.

(Do-do not touch me. It feels disgusting.)

She only felt disgust from within, but was unable to let out a voice.

“I do know. Your body is still beautiful. You are unlike Hikaru’s lustful partner, the utterly filthy, non-virgin Tsuyako. To his one most beloved, Hikaru never kissed you, keeping it so sacred. It was his bad however; he is already dead, unable to obtain such a beautiful, pure Aoi.”

(What is he saying? N-no, do not touch me!)

The damp hand stroked Aoi’s chin and ears, raised her dry, silky straight black hair, and dropped it.

“Ah, a girl with black hair is still the best. Your hair is so soft and straight like threads, Aoi; so different from the red rustic hair of Tsuyako. It is vexing that Tsuyako, who I do not want, is pushed onto me. However, as I am able to get Hikaru’s beloved in you, I shall forgive her.”

“I-I will not marry-you.”

Aoi finally managed to say this.

But Kazuaki merely felt amusement as he cackled.

“Are you actually planning to go out with that ugly red-colored hound? You are so different in status from him. That hound said that he is Hikaru’s friend or something, and you opened your heart to him out of remembrance over Hikaru? How foolish. Such an uncouth lowlife definitely cannot get together with a princess like you, Aoi. Ahahahaha, this is laughable~ third princess! Such a shaggy dog being with Aoi?”

Mr. Akagi is not a shaggy dog.

She was so terrified her legs were trembling, but once she heard him insult Koremitsu, Aoi was so furious her head was boiling.

Using her hands, she pushed Kazuaki away hard.

“Mr. Akagi is much better than you are! I cannot allow you to look down on him!”

It had nothing to do with pedigree.

It had nothing to do with identity.

The boy called Koremitsu Akagi was straightforward, honest, and a gentle person. Aoi knew all of that!

Kazuaki stumbled, but grabbed Aoi’s shoulder immediately, pushing her back onto the wall.

With a loud thud on the wall, Kazuaki’s fingers were entrenched into her shoulders.

As the head had hit the wall, she was starting to feel dizzy.

“What are you protecting him for? Huh? Why are you speaking up for him? Hah, do you understand your own position? Huh, huh, huh, huh, Aoi?”

The chameleon inside the cage let out a monotonous hiss from the throat.

“Let me tell you who is suited to be your partner, Aoi. I really hate you to the point of wanting to shake that beautiful hair of yours, but I shall forgive you. I will put you by my side, comb that hair of yours with a boxwood comb, litter your clothes and hair with fragrances, and treasure you like a doll. Come, Hikaru too will bless the moment I unite with his most beloved, Aoi.”

Hikaru was staring at Aoi through the tawdry golden frame. As Kazuaki narrowed his eyes in ecstasy, a crude voice rang,

“Hikaru will never give you his blessings!”

Chapter 9

In this room of vulgar tastes, there was a bed with red covers, a cage with a chameleon instead, a large mirror with messy decorations; the room was giving off smoke, scattering a thin fragrance. It was a terrible scene.

On the wall was Hikaru’s portrait, placed in a glamorous golden frame.

Aoi was shivering as she stood upright, her back pressed against the wall; Kazuaki had a hand on Aoi’s chin as he turned his face to Koremitsu.

“Mr…Akagi.”

Aoi called out for Koremitsu with tears in her eyes.

At that moment, Koremitsu was already right in front of Kazuaki.; he pried Kazuaki away from Aoi, and caused Kazuaki to fall onto the floor on the backside.

He then kicked down the smoking stove, and opened the windows wide.

Asai, looking on grimly, followed in after Koremitsu, and pulled Aoi to her side.

“Asa…!”

“It is alright now, Aoi.”

Asai spoke with a comforting tone, hugging Aoi tightly.

Hikaru’s tense face finally showed relief.

“Thank goodness, Miss Aoi.”

Koremitsu stood tall, looking like he was protecting Aoi and Asai behind him with his back. His eyes were flaring as he glared at Kazuaki.

Kazuaki, seated on the floor, frowned,

“It was supposed to be locked…how did you get in?”

“I told the manager that there is a kidnapper here, and made him open up.”

Asai spoke harshly as she embraced Aoi.

“So he chose to listen to you, Asai, rather than his master. I am going to fire him.”

Kazuaki spoke in disdain, seemingly not realizing the gravity of his actions. Because of this, Koremitsu was seething more than before.

(This two-faced bastard!)

“You set up all these, right!? Using senpai to lure Aoi away from me, pretend to have a heartfelt talk with me, wanting her to rely on you. Kazuaki! You’re Rokujō, right!?”

Tōjō had said that Kazuaki was a member of the Udates.

That the Udates had a shrine worshipping the spider. Kazuaki probably heard of the spider curse related to all the Udate women.

And so, he became ‘Rokujō’.

Why did Rokujō appear ‘now’, of all times?

It was because due to Hikaru’s death, there was a vacancy for Aoi’s fiance.

And because Aoi was starting to open her heart to Hikaru’s friend, Koremitsu.

To Kazuaki, who was obsessed with Aoi, Koremitsu was an eyesore. That was why he tried to lure Koremitsu to another woman, and get Aoi to hate Koremitsu.

At the garden party, he too set an elaborate trap to ensnare Koremitsu, and to misdirect Aoi.

The modern spider’s reincarnation, the Rokujō Tsuyako so feared was this seemingly ordinary looking Kazuaki.

(And I thought senpai liked this guy. What an idiot I am.)

He actually thought of pairing Tsuyako and Kazuaki together.

He recalled himself boasting arrogantly to Hikaru that his love skill has improved by a little, that Hikaru should just stay back and watch; upon recalling it, he felt so sheepish he wanted to roll about on the floor.

“What are you talking about? I do not understand.”

Kazuaki continued to insist shamelessly.

It was unknown what exactly was he thinking.

There was Hikaru’s portrait on the wall, Aoi’s personal belongings in the trashbin, and also, there was a pile of what seemed to be black animal fur. In fact, that was a wig.

Koremitsu grabbed that wig, and threw it at Kazuaki.

The pitch black hair flew in the air, landing right on Kazuaki’s head. The long black hair covered Kazuaki’s face loosely.

“Here’s the concrete evidence! Stop playing dumb here, you crossdressing pervert!”

With a sweet voice, Kazuaki cackled, causing Koremitsu to be shocked.

Aoi, embraced by Asai, trembled; Asai too scowled in a terrifying manner.

Hikaru watched this half-brother of his who so happened to have the same voice with a tense, stern look.

Kazuaki did not take off the wig that was draped messily over his face, but continued to cackle while on the floor. He was not laughing because it was funny; it sounded as if he was mocking those he felt was more wretched than he was.

The face was covered by the wig as he spoke with a rich, clear voice, sounding like a ghost hiding in the darkness.

“To think I was betrayed by Tsuyako~ That child would always listen to me obediently as my servant. After she started dating Hikaru and lost her virginity, it seems she was mistaken about something and became arrogant, becoming a

female delinquent. She is supposed to be ‘trash’ whose hair is so ugly.”

With a frozen face, Hikaru yelled,

“Tsuyako’s hair is not some red, rustic color! That’s a color as beautiful as the red weeping cherry blossom!!”

Rage was rising up within Koremitsu’s throat.

“SHUT UP YOU PERVERT! DON’T YOU DARE SLANDER SENPAI WITH THAT FILTHY MOUTH OF YOURS! SENPAI ISN’T TRASH! SHE’S A WOMAN WITH BEAUTIFUL RED HAIR, IMPORTANT TO HIKARU HIMSELF! SHE’S NOT SOMETHING TO WORK AT YOUR BECK AND CALL!”

Kazuaki curled his lips.

“What an uncivilized barbarian you are. Do you not know? Let me tell you.”

He pulled down the black wig covering his face with his effeminate fingers.

The narrow eyes were staring at Koremitsu alluringly.

“I can be forgiven by anyone no matter what I do.”

And at the next instant, Koremitsu’s face wrecked Kazuaki’s nose.

The wig fell, and Kazuaki rolled back on the floor, his head hitting the wall, resulting in a tremendous thud. He covered his face with both hands, groaning.

It seemed the nose was broken. There was fresh red blood seeping through the gaps of the fingers. Kazuaki checked his face through the mirror, and once he saw that the part below his eyes were dyed red, he immediately shrieked,

“M-MY FACE! MY FACE! WAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!”

He probably was majorly affected by it as he covered his face with both hands, rolling about on the floor.

Koremitsu did not pity him at all.

“No matter whether its Aoi or senpai, I’ll beat you up as many times as I want if you dare do anything to them! I’m a barbarian who can’t be talked down!”

Koremitsu declared, and said,

“We’re taking this with us too. It’s nauseating to have a friend’s portrait placed in your room, you wretch.”

Koremitsu took down Hikaru’s portrait along with the frame from the wall, tucked it under his armpit, and left the building with Aoi and Asai.

The Asais’ vehicle was parked right in front of the door.

Aoi was probably feeling afraid; her pale face remained lowered as Asai supported her out, closing her eyes from time to time, trembling.

Hikaru too seemed worried.

Koremitsu felt an aching in his chest. However, it was good that he managed to save Aoi without a hitch.

And then, once they got to the vehicle, Asai suddenly shot an unhappy, icy stare at Koremitsu.

“I feel peeved here.”

She spoke in a monotonous tone.

She still wants to taunt me at such a time?
Koremitsu was feeling incensed deep inside, and Asai’s scowl became more pronounced as she said to him,

“I wanted to beat him up. You beat him up before I could.”

(Eh?)

Beat him…she wanted to beat Kazuaki up?

While Koremitsu was feeling flabbergasted, Asai and Aoi got on the car.

After frisking the portrait from Koremitsu quickly, she shut the doors, and the car departed.

“Hey! Let me get on too!”

Koremitsu yelled in the midst of the quiet place, where the lush greenery grew.

♢ ♢ ♢

(Akagi!! You’re too slow!!! What are you doing?)

Honoka was in the hall, waiting anxiously for Koremitsu’s arrivial.

(The recital’s about the begin!)

She had been dialling Koremitsu’s number for some some time, but the phone was either cut off, or left at the voicemail; she was unable to get through to him.

(Did he forget to charge his phone again?)

She hoped that Koremitsu would encourage Tsuyako before the latter would take the stage.

In the rest lounge, she saw Tsuyako dressed in peasant clothing, a black wig on her head, her face painted snowy white. She had her head lowered in such a state.

She looked extremely frail, fidgeting with her arms fold in front of her chest, switched about a few times, let out anguished sighs, bit her lips, and lowered her eyes.

She sounded and looked so cheerful when they went their separate ways after school the previous days; it seemed she had completely cheered up then.

What exactly happened with Akagi.

There seemed something strange when she went back…did she say something to Akagi?

Honoka felt extremely anxious, and recalled the conversation in the rest lounge.

“You’ll definitely dance well, Upperclassman Tsuyako. That performance yesterday was so mesmerizing. Ah, I brought some Kuzumochi. How about you have some? You’ll feel relaxed when you eat sweet things.”

Honoka tried her best to improve Tsuyako’s mood through her own way, but,

“Thank you…there is no need for there.”

Tsuyako merely answered with such a stiff tone.

“Miss Shikibu. Is Mr. Akagi back?”

“No, I have yet to see him.”

“Is that so…”

Her face became glum as a result.

Honoka did not know what was going on, but it seemed Tsuyako was waiting for Koremitsu to return.

And thus, Honoka hoped that if Koremitsu could make it in time, she would drag him to the rest lounge immediately as she waited at the lobby. The recital however was about to begin.

“Hono, it’s about time to get seated. It’ll be obvious if you enter once the recital begins.”

Michiru came over to call her in.

“Uu…yes.”

Honoka looked back at the entrance, and trudged forth with heavy steps.

(Akagi, you will make it in time…you will come by, right?)

♢ ♢ ♢

(It is really scary to get onto the stage.)

Tsuyako’s hands were trembling in the rest lounge, devoid of anyone else.

(With hands like these, I will drop the fan again.)

Just a while ago, Asai gave Tsuyako a call through the cellphone with an icy tone.

She said that Aoi was safely recovered.

“Your ex-fiance is a hopeless degenerate. I do think you have lived quite the wasted life, for you to obey such a hopeless man.”

And she added some spite at the end,

“Why must you grovel to such a man? How about you dump him earlier?”
From Asai’s voice, Tsuyako could feel the lashing that befits Asai.

However, the fear Tsuyako felt because of Kazuaki was not something that could be removed so easily. Even after telling Koremitsu of Aoi’s location, Tsuyako was trembling all the way. She had the sensation of a spider scuttling all over her body once she thought of the punishment Kazuaki would inflict of her.

Everyone else had assumed that Kazuaki was an ordinary, refined person, but that was not the real Kazuaki.

Kazuaki’s real nature was that of an extremely persistent spider.

Kazuaki’s mother and Tsuyako’s father were cousins, so when the Udates had a banquet, Kazuaki was brought along by his mother.

To the adults, the older, feeble youth seemed to be a well-nurtured, honest, quiet child.

But when he was alone with Tsuyako, he would pull Tsuyako’s hair, inspect it, and say,

“That is a filthy, dirty color like red rust.”

And he would show a smile.

Tsuyako was so shocked she could not let out a voice.

–My hair is an ugly red rustic color.

Kazuaki’s words echoed a few times deep within his ears, causing her to cover herself in the blanket, crying.

Ever since then, she was ashamed of others seeing her red rustic hair, becoming an introverted girl who often hid silently in a corner

She would try her best to avoid meeting Kazuaki.

But at the year Tsuyako entered the affiliated elementary school of Heian Academy, she was betrothed to Kazuaki.

Ever since then, it was hell for her.

Whenever Kazuaki saw Tsuyako, he would look at her hair with a despondent look, muttering,

“Aoi of the Saotomes is engaged to Hikaru, and has such beautiful hair. Why is your hair such an ugly rustic color, Tsuyako?”

Every single time, Tsuyako’s chest would shrink tightly.

That was not all.

There was once when Tsuyako wore a frilly one piece dress her father bought from France and a hat with a ribbon. Kazuaki smiled at her, saying,

“Take off your clothes, Tsuyako. That dress and hat does not suit you at all. It definitely suits me better.”

Tsuyako could not refuse.

She lowered her head, and removed her clothes, leaving only a thin, loose undergarment.

Kazuaki put on Tsuyako’s dress, wore the hat, took a look at the mirror, raised the hems of the dress lightly, and spun around, looking extremely satisfied.

“See? I look much more beautiful~ wearing this.”

He said these words and left the house in such a state.

And so, the plucking the tulips at Aoi’s house was deemed to be Tsuyako’s prank. On that night, Tsuyako was scolded by her parents.

It seemed the girl who plucked the tulips was dressed in a one-piece dress, wearing a hat, just like Tsuyako.

“That was Mr. Kazuaki.”

Tsuyako summoned her courage as she said this. However, her father said ‘do not say such foolish words’, and was more incensed as a result. Her mother too sighed, saying ‘it is embarrassing that you push the blame on someone else’. Even Kazuaki himself sighed and said,

“I thought you would not be the type of girl to do such a thing, Tsuyako. You even lied to avoid getting scolded. I really am disappointed here.”

No matter what I say, nobody will believe me.

Once she had realized this, Tsuyako felt despair all over.

Because of this incident, when she decided to head over to England to study, Kazuaki smiled at her politely, and said,

“My fiancee is a girl with red rustic hair, lacking in charm, inapt in brains, and lacks basic etiquette. If everyone else is to know of this, you will be the one to be shamed, Tsuyako. It is for your sake that you are going to England to study, huh?”

She felt really lonely to be separated from her family, living alone in an English boarding school. Why was she the only one to have such unfortunate events? Tsuyako would often cry on the bed in her hostel.

Am I rejected because my hair is a red rustic color?

If I am someone with dry, smooth black hair, will everyone else accept me?

She was able to return back during her summer vacations and Christmas period, but when Kazuaki saw that she had grown taller and bustier, he said with a devastated look.

“Do you know that the smaller girls are the ones boys lik? Aoi is so slender and tiny, but you seem to be growing, Tsuyako? Your breasts are so large it seems lewd. I think you should control them with some underwear. Aoi’s breasts are really pretty and cute.”

And from that day on, Tsuyako was often ordered by Kazuaki to hand her clothes over to him.

“Because these clothes suit me better than you, Tsuyako.”

He would always say such a thing.

With such an appearance, he placed the rat carcass at Aoi’s house, and continued to pluck the flowers belonging to others unrelated.

“Why must you pluck the flowers off?”

One day, Tsuyako asked this tentatively. Kazuaki raised his lips, answering sweetly,

“I feel happy doing this. They are easy to pluck, and when they fall, they look really ugly.”

He answered with a sweet voice.

Kazuaki narrows his eyes in delight, showing an icy smile by his lips. That expression caused Tsuyako to shudder.

The Udates worship a spider.

She felt as if the embodiment of ‘
Rokujō’ was residing within Kazuaki, and felt the silver strands of the spider were ensnaring her neck, choking her.

Even in England, she was unable to escape from Kazuaki.

The threads Kazuaki let out often entailed her.

That was once she felt.

When she grew older, her classmates started talking about love.

But when she saw them talk enthusiastically with blushing faces, Tsuyako’s mind was only filled with the damp, soft smile of Kazuaki.

I am not allowed to love like everyone else.

Once I return to Japan, I can only marry Mr. Kazuaki.

I can never love in my life.

Ever since this moment, she started learning the ‘Your Shadow’ style of dance from an assistant instructor who came to England.

She studied it to learn some etiquette, but gradually came to love dancing itself.

But even so, when the dance was about the topic of romance, she would feel her chest being stumped, her face would become glum, and her limb movements stiffen.

“There is no ‘color’ in your dance, Tsuyako. If you have some romance in your life, maybe your dancing style might change.”

Her instructor would often say this so casually.

However, Tsuyako felt as if her heart was about to be ripped out.

I never fell in love in my life.

The future for her was so bleak, so dark, and whenever she did a romantic dance, she felt anguished.

And just like this, when Tsuyako returned to Japan during her Spring park, she met Aoi at an evening garden party.

She only saw her once or twice from afar when they were young, but it was the first time she saw the her after having grown up.

Kazuaki had always praised Aoi’s elegant black hair surrounding that white, tender face of hers, and whenever Aoi moved, the hair draped down to her small breasts and her slender waist swayed about.

Her eyes, nose and lips were so adorable like a doll. The adults surrounding Aoi watched her with an intoxicating gentleness.

“Our Aoi has liked young Hikaru since young. She pestered me, saying that she wanted Hikaru no matter what, and I have no choice in the matter.”

And due to her father’s words, Aoi’s raised her eyebrows.

“I-I never said such things. Hikaru is so unfaithful and insincere, always going about to beautiful women. I really hate him most!”

She said, and then argued with her cheeks blushing.

“If I am to cancel the engagement however, Hikaru will play around more. I have no choice but to be engaged with him.”

Seeing Aoi like this was enough for Tsuyako to realize that Aoi really loved her fiance. As a result, she was no longer able to watch on any further.

I am so jealous of Aoi!

I am so jealous that she is able to fall in love with her fiance! So jealous of her because she is blessed by the people around her!

Feeling a prickly pain all over, tears welled within Tsuyako, her throat nearly breaking apart.

Her inner heart was writhing in pain, like she was being tortured, and she ran to a dim place devoid of anyone else. She saw a cherry blossom tree that was without any flowers, basking under the moonlight's radiance, and the emotions that swirled within her rushed out.

I am just like this tree.

A tree nobody cares, forgotten without blooming

B-but, I too really wish to fall in love.

Her tears nearly fell as she lifted her head, watching the moonlight appearing between the twigs. The shrouded moon was too tall, too far; the crude tree branches that had yet to bloom seemed so cold, so lonely. Tears welled in her

further a she swayed about hazily.

I want to fall in love.

I want to have some romance, even if it is just once.

I wish to be an important person to someone.

If only the moon can take the form of a beautiful youth and descend upon me. If only he can embrace me. If only that happens, I can give up my life at that instant.

With tears in her ears, Tsuyako hummed the song she learned during dancing class.

“If God is out there…please slowly descend…descend…what kind of God is it… are you shy?”

Why would the god in the sky not descend upon me?

Is it because I am an ugly girl with red rustic hair?

That no matter how I pray, this fairy tale-like story will not befall upon me!

At this moment, the cherry blossom branches rustled slightly, and appearing on the other side was a slender, pretty boy shrouded by the moonlight.

“That just now was ‘The Songs to Make the Dust Dance on the Beams’, right? That is what a new miko prays to god, saying ‘please do not be shy and come down’. Are you calling for such a god?”

He spoke with a rich, sweet voice.

The voice seemed similar to Kazuaki, causing Tsuyako to tremble.

At the same time, she recalled the half-brother of Kazuaki everyone was talking about.

He had the exact same voice as Kazuaki, but was much prettier than the latter; he had clear eyes, a charm that caused many a woman to be infatuated with, a boy who goes about philandering.

Is it this child? Hikaru Mikado–?

That was an encounter.

Hikaru said that he was watching the flowers. Tsuyako said that the flowers were not in bloom, and Hikaru answered that they would bloom from today onwards, praising Tsuyako’s hair for being as pretty as the red weeping cherry

blossom.

From then on, Tsuyako felt that everything has changed.

When time the red hair grew to below her breasts, she did not think that it was a red rustic color anymore, and did not hide herself as a result.

It felt as if the strands binding her had snapped, and her limbs were able to move freely, her dancing improved to a point where even the instructor was amazed. The stares everyone give to Tsuyako too had changed.

Hikaru had changed Tsuyako.

Hikaru allowed Tsuyako to bloom.

As long as Hikaru remained around, there was nothing Tsuyako was afraid of. She was not afraid to do anything bold.

However, Hikaru died.

Like the moon being shrouded by the clouds, so that the light dazzling in Tsuyako’s eyes vanish.

And then, the spider,
Rokujō, spoke softly to the perplexed Tsuyako.

–Mother is the one who said to abandon the engagement, but I never remembered agreeing to that. If I can get Aoi, I do not need that red rustic hair of yours, Tsuyako. You are to help me. Lure in that shaggy dog called Akagi and pull him away from Aoi. You should be able to do this, Tsuyako. You are no longer a virgin after all.

Tsuyako felt the blood freeze all over in her body, her body suddenly unable to move.

The notion that she was able to escape from Rokujō's clutches before this was completely wrong. Even till this point, she was trapped in the spider's threads. She was unable to move her fingertips, her throat unable to call out, and her eyes were unable to look away; these were the facts that told her of this truth. Again Tsuyako was pushed into the abyss.

She approached Koremitsu, and deliberately kissed him in front of Aoi at the garden party.

On Kazuaki's demand, she took off her uniform and handed it to him. The faint aroma remained on the returned uniform, and feeling repulsed, she scrubbed it with water quite a few times.

On the day she went to the tropical botanical gardens with Koremitsu, her witnessing the spider reminded her to Kazuaki demanding that she remove her

uniform in the clubroom.

There was still a faint smell after he obtained Hikaru’s portrait and returned the uniform smugly. Tsuyako continued to sob as she wore the uniform and doused herself with cold water at the swimming pool’s bathroom. After that, Tsuyako apologized to Koremitsu a few times, for the latter showed concern for her.

I am sorry, Mr. Akagi, sorry.

Kazuaki’s obsession with Aoi was abnormal.

–I want Hikaru’s most beloved.

Kazuaki spoke with a demonic stare, his appearance vaguely human at best, an embodiment of the spider. Upon thinking about what sort of misfortune would occur to Aoi, Tsuyako felt her heart nearly cease.

She cannot allow Aoi to fall into Kazuaki’s hands!

However, Kazuaki was terrifying.

She could not oppose him.

She hoped that someone could notice his intentions.

When she sent the message to Aoi using Koremitsu's phone, she merely deleted Aoi's reply when it came, leaving her original message behind. It was a bet on her part.

The fact that Aoi refused the prior appointment with Kazuaki, and chose to go out with Koremitsu instead caused Kazuaki to be thoroughly infuriated unlike before.

–This is unforgivable, Third Princess! That red wild hound is dating Aoi!

–Aoi here is being too frivolous here. Hikaru has just died, and now she wants to approach another man.

–And she despises me just like when we were young.

–I only treated her kindly because she is Hikaru's most beloved, cute, petite and has that unique black hair. This is vexing, Third Princess.

–Perhaps Aoi needs a little re-education~

–It is alright, I will not do anything too much. Aoi here is Hikaru's most beloved. I will just place her in a pretty box and take care of her. I cannot wait till my graduation; I must make her my bride immediately. I am so looking forward to it,

Third Princess.

He showed such a demonic smile, sleazily petting the cage that had his pet chameleon inside. In the face of such a mystifying sight, Tsuyako barely managed to hold in her shrieks a few times.

Could Aoi, sheltered by her parents and Asai, raised in a delicate environment, withstand such terror?

Perhaps she would be toyed around by him, trodden upon. Hikaru's most beloved flower would be ripped apart by Kazuaki.

–Please, Mr. Akagi. Notice this.

Tsuyako told herself that she could no longer get Koremitsu involved in this. However, as Koremitsu called him 'senpai' with an earnest look, she inadvertently wanted to plead him for help, and earnestly prayed.

Koremitsu arrived.

He managed to decipher the words from Tsuyako, ensnared in her fear of Rokujō, and saved Aoi.

It was greatness.

The girl Hikaru chose at the end would not have to be Rokujō’s sacrifice.

Really, thank goodness.

She hoped that Aoi at least was able to be the pure white flower Hikaru treasured

(But I am still imprisoned by Rokujō.)

Even when she tried to stop, her fingers kept shivering.

Her body felt heavy, as if tied down to the floor by strings.

She inadvertently thought about Kazuaki–Rokujō.

‘That red rustic hair is so ugly’ the sweet voice echoed deep within her ears, never vanishing.

(Why…must you die, Hikaru? If you are not around, I cannot go on. I will become this feeble, back to the lady with the red rustic hair.)

Before she danced on stage, Hikaru would do a spell on her.

He would gently raise Tsuyako’s hand, and draw a circle on her palm using his slender, white finger.

–Now everything will be alright. The moon will not be shrouded by the haze. It will continue to shine above you.

He would show a gentle smile.

And a sweet, gentle voice that would enter her ears smoothly.

And as he always said, Hikaru would often appear in the audience, shining upon Tsuyako whenever the latter danced.

Praising her more than anyone else.

(If only you were still alive…Hikaru. As long as that happens…even if you truly love someone else.)

The world without Hikaru was so dark, lonely, and she could not dance.

A girl, her fellow student, came over to prompt her. “It is your turn to appear. Hurry.”

Tsuyako slowly got up, and walked to the stage.

The lights, when viewed from the side of the stage, was so bright. The young girls were dressed in yellow kimonos, looking like field mustards as they danced cutely.

But to Tsuyako, it seemed as dark as a moonless night, causing her limbs to shrink back.

(It is scary)

The spiders were crawling out from the darkness.

Not one, but many.

They scampered across the stage in droves.

(Hikaru, come save me. Hikaru.)

I cannot dance.

I cannot dance at all.

“Miss Tsuyako, please come out!”

She was taken aback upon hearing this voice.

She should be dancing and appearing on the stage once the verse ends, but she missed the timing.

Tsuyako hurried onto the stage.

(What do I do? My legs are not listening to me, my hands are not nimble. I cannot hear the voices.)

The more anxious she was, the heavier her body got.

The trembling in her fingers did not stop.

The two levels of audience seats were already filled up.

But Hikaru was not there.

The gentle moon shining upon the stage was no longer rising.

At that moment–the door at the 2nd level audience opened, and a boy barged in.

He was probably very anxious.

His slightly curved shoulders were quivering in pain.

The sharp ends of his red hair was ruffling wildly.

(That is…)

Tsuyako’s stare was directed towards the boy.

The boy walked down the aisle, arrived at the front of the balcony, and waved his right hand high at Tsuyako while the latter stood blankly on the stage.

(Mr. Akagi…)

The stiff face, unhappy scowl appeared as a fresh image in Tsuyako’s mind.

The messy red-haired youth with a sharp expression was Hikaru’s crude, honest, straightforward friend.

–I’ll be here before your performance begins.

He said this, and darted out.

–I’ll definitely come by to watch your performance.

He told her with a clumsy tone.

That boy raised his hand up, made the gesture of someone holding a pen, and slowly drew a large circle.

He drew a round moon in the audience.

–Senpai, you’ll be the one who’ll move the audience most tomorrow.

–I’ll watch in the audience with my eyes wide, in place of Hikaru.

The clear moonlight shone in from between the clouds, raining silently, creating a gentle light in the dim space of black.

A weak light too shone into Tsuyako’s heart.

Hikaru’s friend, so different in terms of face and personality, drew a moon in place of Hikaru.

It was a hazy moon giving off a faint light, floating in the night sky!

Her body suddenly became light, and she naturally began to dance.

(Ahh…I am dancing right now.)

(Mr. Akagi.)

(I can dance now.)

The moon in the night was lured by the cherry blossom petals to the village girl out in the wild.

The girl happily received the cherry blossom petals fluttering down with her palms.

The innocent girl had yet to learn about love.

Narihira, who came from the capital, appeared in front of such a girl.

The girl fell in love immediately with this trendy prince with a gentle expression.

She continued to dance elegantly, ostensibly drunk in her first love.

Moving her toes just as if she was gliding on the floor.

Gently twirling her arms.

Shyly tilting her neck, shoulder.

The fingertips were grabbing the collar of her kimono slightly, showing a gentle, quiet moonlight.

She, having learned of what love was, was utterly elated.

She was truly chuffed to have fallen for such a beautiful, noble man.

She was blissful.

With such a delighted feeling, Tsuyako smiled at the audience.

The eyes looking up at the moon–

The boy standing in front of her was the one who came to fulfill Hikaru’s promise.

Above the serious, earnest him, there was a vague sight of Hikaru smiling gently at her, and deep within her ears, there was a rich, sweet voice.

–Hey, Tsuyako. There will definitely be a lot of people who came from afar to watch you. They will be mesmerized by your actions, like how the flowers sway, how the branches move, sighing in amazement. You are the most beautiful

flower in the garden.

(Hikaru, I was really happy when you came to my house.)

(You said there was nothing to be afraid of, and even held me gently by the hand. I was truly happy.)

(I was really happy that you praised my hair. You would promise me that you would be in the audience, watching me dance, and would be the first to praise me of my performance. Those made me really happy.)

(I feel really delighted, moved to tears whenever you draw the moon in my palm. I am able to be brave, dance with more beauty than anyone else.)

The clear moonlight shone gently upon the lonely tree without flower, muttering with a radiant voice, ‘The flowers will bloom one day’. At this point, that moon is shining upon Tsuyako.

Blessing its clear light right above her.

This was what Hikaru’s friend told her.

That her promise with Hikaru was still continuing.

◇ ◇ ◇

Koremitsu stood at the balcony, watching Hikaru's 'flower'.

She twirled her arms, swung her hands in an adorable manner, showing a smile on her lips as she revealed a bashful look. She looked just like a 14-15 year old innocent girl, captivating people to the point of them being unable to look away.

(Senpai is really beautiful.)

Hikaru too stood beside Koremitsu, watching Tsuyako dance, narrowing his clear eyes with ecstasy.

And then, he said proudly,

"Look, Koremitsu, this is the most beautiful red weeping cherry blossom in my garden."

◇ ◇ ◇

(Yes, as long as I still remember my promise with Hikaru, the moon shall always shine above me.)

Whenever she raised her arms, tilted her neck, took a step forth, she would always think of Hikaru.

She would think of the happiness he brought her.

She would think of the love he brought her.

–The flower has yet to bloom.

–It will bloom tonight. The most beautiful cherry blossoms who bloom on this branch. These are the cherry blossoms I see. Ah, they are so beautiful. I am looking forward to seeing them.

–Your hair is really red and pretty. If you leave it long, it will be like the red weeping cherry blossoms. I really want to see them.

Tsuyako was not Hikaru’s most beloved.

But that did not matter to her.

What she could be sure of was that Hikaru did love her before.

On the evening of their meeting, Tsuyako was earnestly hoping for love, to the point where there was practically a mark etched on her chest, and Hikaru

himself fulfilled this wish of hers.

(Yes, I am in love with the moon floating in the sky.)

How many girls exactly have had such love?

Who exactly allowed themselves to experience such a fast-beating heart, dizziness and delight.

(And right now, at the moment when I am dancing–O moon, please shine upon me again.)

Tsuyako lifted her head and looked up at the shrouded moon appearing in the audience, not pleading feebly this time, but calling with an alluring smile.

She opened her faint red fan, fluttering gently in front of the faces.

The spring pixies danced about, putting new clothes upon Tsuyako from behind, removing her wig.

The plain village girl outfit was replaced by the long-sleeved golden red luxurious clothing littered with cherry blossom patterns. The hair combed upwards was undone, becoming red like a cherry blossom, scattering upon the breasts and back with gloss.

The ordinary village lady became the spirit of the cherry blossom, the queen of Spring.

The audience let out a huge cry of amazement, stares of praise raining upon Tsuyako.

At that instant, the moonlight fluttered into Tsuyako’s heart.

Hikaru had descended upon Tsuyako’s heart.

He was smiling in her heart, whispering in her heart, breathing in her heart.

–The floral language of the weeping cherry blossom is that of an outstanding person.

–It really suits you, Tsuyako.

Tsuyako felt the sweet sensation and agony of blissfulness all over her body, and embraced them fully.

(Even if God is to prepare a gentler, plainer fate for me, I shall reject it.)

(Even if it is Miss Aoi herself, I do not wish to exchange fates with her.)

For there will be heart-wrenching events loneliness and agony in the future.

For there will be moments where she looks up at the moon alone, weeping as she thinks about Hikaru.

However, she has to remove her tears in front of others, showing a beautiful smile.

For I am the most beautiful, dignified flower in the garden.

And I shall continue to be that flower.

The beauty was something everyone else has to marvel at, such elegance, allure could even reach a distant place. The name of the owner who caused such a flower to bloom would be greatly praised. She wanted to be such a beautiful flower–a flower who cannot be violated.

Tsuyako’s appearance was to end.

The moonlight became dim, and Hikaru vanished from Tsuyako’s heart.

She felt lonely, really lonely. It felt as if her chest was being wrenched.

But even so, she was no longer afraid of the clouds and darkness that shrouded the moon.

For she knew that on the other side of the thick clouds, the moon would be shining no matter what.

“Farewell, Hikaru. I shall love you forever.”

The boy caused this tree, once devoid of any buds, to bloom red flowers. Her eyes were becoming blurry due to her tears as she whispered this to the boy.

“The same goes for me too, Tsuyako.”

It seemed she heard a gentle farewell before the curtains fell.

◇ ◇ ◇

It is a really tough thing to keep to a promise, Koremitsu.

My feelings when I make them were sincere, and I truly believed I could fulfill them.

At the moment I made a promise, I felt as if I had connected with the girl's heart. She would then be embarrassed, smiling at me happily. I really like this sacred and blissfully sweet feeling.

But there are some moments where I could not fulfill the promises I could have made.

Eh? 'You make too many promises'?

'Don't make any promises for everything. Try thinking about me when I've to go about fulfilling your promises', you say?

Yes, I have caused you to suffer all this while.

Especially this time.

It is not just about Tsuyako; both the matters of Miss Aoi and my older brother are beyond my expectations, to a point where my heart nearly broke a few times, given that it should not be moving. If anything had happened to Miss Aoi, I probably would have regretted to the point of not departing to the afterlife. It is really great that Miss Aoi is alright.

After that, you ran all the way to Tsuyako as fast as you can. You were abandoned at a place even the trains and buses do not appear, and even when trying to hitch a ride, your face looked as scary as someone who just murdered a person, so no car was willing to stop. You then got in front of a car and forced

it to stop; at that moment, I thought of the moment where I first met you.

Like back then, you never thought about yourself at all, always going forward for the sake of others.

Koremitsu.

Am I able to fulfill my promise with Tsuyako?

I feel that the answer is on that stage.

The serious expression you showed, the large moon you drew at the balcony; after all that happened, Tsuyako was suddenly full of life, and started dancing radiantly.

That is because you gave Tsuyako the moon in place of me.

It is a moon bigger than mine, one that will continue to shine for eternity.

Tsuyako was once my ‘pride’.

I was always mesmerized by her radiant smile, dazzling lively eyes, elegant arm movements, and the red hair that drapes down.

Just looking at her dance was enough for anyone to straighten their backs, their souls seemingly floating in the air.

How can such a beautiful girl ever exist?

The girl who yearned for love when we first met had bloomed into such a wondrous flower.

To Tsuyako, who smiled and concluded that she will never exchange her fate with Miss Aoi, I am truly proud of her.

Tsuyako never compared herself with others.

And she never was envious of what others had.

She accepted the risks and anguish that came with freedom, looking forward positively.

There were times where I felt of cursing my fate, and whenever I did so, I felt despair over how small, how powerless I was, wandering about in a dark maze.

Should I really be allowed to born? Was it really a mistake right from the beginning? I would have such pessimistic thoughts just like that.

But whenever I saw Tsuyako, as dignified as the red weeping cherry blossom, I felt that I too have to proceed forward.

I felt really happy when I shared secrets with Tsuyako in the Japanese Dance clubroom, when we embraced each other, kissed each other. We did lots of things together, whether they were terrifying or bad.

She is the best lover.

She is an accomplice.

Tsuyako said that her encounter with me caused her to change, but her might is something she earned through her hard work.

Thus, it did not vanish because of my death.

As long as she continues to dance, Tsuyako will definitely realize it, even if it is a matter of time.

And then, everyone will flock by from afar to watch Tsuyako. They will show amazement at the red weeping cherry blossom that sways, the sight of the flowers scattering, and summon their courage. Tsuyako's beauty shall be praised and become widespread.

If possible, I really wish that I am still alive and introduce you to Tsuyako through my own word of mouth, Koremitsu.

To introduce the friend I am so proud of, as the lover I am so proud of.

I feel that Tsuyako gets along surprisingly well with you, in terms of boldness, the might of being undaunted by what others say, and the devotion to those important to you.

Tsuyako is one who often likes to smile, so if you two are together, you might be affected by her, and able to smile too.

That will be great.

Now then, if you can talk about me with Tsuyako after I am gone, and remember me, I will be delighted.

I too will continue to watch Tsuyako dance; no matter where the place is, what the place is, I shall applaud her all the way.

I am currently on this land.

One day, I shall be in the distant sky.

If both of you, who I truly love, are able to laugh every single day, my heart will be filled with relief and delight even when I am floating alone in space.

Perhaps I will be able to endure my loneliness.

Epilogue

It was the last day of the first semester, and Koremitsu submitted to Tsuyako his request form to join the Japanese Dance Club.

To be precise,
he was forced to submit.

“Please take care of us, Upperclassman Tsuyako.”

Honoka was at his side, greeting cheerfully.

Her eyes were normally raised, scowling, but at this point, her face was beaming, her cheeks and mouth gentle.

She was grinning away during the end-of-semester ceremony.

“Hey Akagi, greet her properly. You’re going to be an official member under upperclassman Tsuyako’s care!”

Honoka said this as she pressed Koremitsu’s head down from behind, causing him to bow.

“Why do I have to join too?”

“Goodness, stop coming now. Michiru and I have already submitted our request forms, so you come along too.”

“I-I-I still have work as the class and student committee representative, so I can’t really come by, but Hono said that she’s joining too…erm, well…if you’re to join in on the club activity, Mr. Akagi, your School Points will increase.”

The class representative with braids said timidly.

“There’s no other amazing club who will accept you as a delinquent, Mr. Akagi… this is the last chance for you to turn your life around.”

“I’M NOT A DELINQUENT! YOU’RE MAKING IT SOUND OUT OF HAND!!”

Koremitsu hollered, and Michiru immediately hid behind Honoka in shock.

“Seriously, don’t scare Michiru. Isn’t it good either way, Akagi? You’re bored, and this clubroom does feel comfy. You said it yourself that it’s good to gather here and chit-chat after school, right?”

After hearing Honoka’s words, Koremitsu’s face sizzled.

He did say it.

After that incident was settled, he was feeling tardy.

He was furious whenever he thought about Hikaru’s brother Kazuaki, and it was worrying that Aoi was still in a funk.

However, he managed to settle one of Hikaru’s wishes.

And after school, while spacing out at his own desk,

“You’re not going to the clubroom today?”

Honoka asked him.

“Well, I joined the club temporarily until senpai’s problems are settled…but it doesn’t feel that bad over there. Speaking of which, I do feel a little lonely if I don’t have anything to do.”

He really should not have muttered those words so carelessly.

“In that case, why don’t you become an official member? I’m thinking of submitting my request form here; I’ll get your copy too!”

Honoka said this, suddenly enthused.

“I don’t need it. Just take yours!”

He panicked.

“Nope. I-it’s meaningless if you don’t come by…Akagi.”

Honoka curled her lips and looked down at Koremitsu, her face completely red, causing the him to feel giddy and unable to say anything. In the end, Koremitsu could only fill in the club entrance request form with proper handwriting.

(Am I really going to improve my image by writing ‘belonging to the Japanese Dance Club’ on this form when I’m a guy? I just feel like I’m going to ruin the scenery…)

He murmured as he curled his lips into a frown. Beside him, Hikaru chimed in cheerfully,

“It sure looks like a harem now that there are three women and one Koremitsu.”

“Tch! Who’s having a harem!!!?”

Koremitsu inadvertently exclaimed.

Honoka raised her eyebrows, her face blushing.

“A-a harem!? Are you still thinking of such a thing, Akagi!? Idiot! Pervert!”

She yapped while kicking his butt. Michiru too was affected,

“I-I-I-I-I-I-I’m a no go too! I like the prince charming type; the beast, monster type is…”

“Wait! That’s–“

Koremitsu hurriedly tried to refute, but at this moment a cheerful voice rang.

“Is it not good to be in Mr. Akagi’s harem?”

Tsuyako was showing a relaxed smile, staring upon their conversation as she said such bold, unbelievable words.

While Honoka was staring at her, she winked back, and said another problematic line,

“There needs to be competition in love to make things more exciting. I want to join in too.”

“No, wait! You with A-A-A-A-Akagi, upperclassman?”

“Yeah, what are you saying now, senpai?”

“Wow, isn’t Mr Akagi being rather popular now?”

Tsuyako watched her anxious underclassmen with delight, and threw in another bomb.

“Oh my, Mr Akagi will become a very good man in the future. I think it is a win if you can take the initiative now.”

She was completely enjoying things here.

“I too agree with Tsuyako, but Koremitsu, I think that you are a fine man now, a hero.”

Hikaru too joined the conversation with a smile.

He had said before that both Tsuyako and Koremitsu were similar in certain ways, but this was clearly not the case!

(Senpai’s similar to you instead, Hikaru!)

Having joined this club with such an upperclassman as the chairperson, Koremitsu was starting to feel uneasy. Honoka dragged his arm forcefully,

closed in on his ear, and whispered,

“A-a harem is impossible for you, Akagi…this is an advice from your Heliotrope–“

Honoka warned him with a serious look. After seeing such a scene, Koremitsu felt some respect for her…

(This girl’s always worried about me, even helping me.)

It would be a no go for him to think that it was to be expected.

And so,

“I haven’t forgotten, Shikibu.”

Koremitsu whispered.

“Eh?”

“About you saying you like me.”

Koremitsu was still perplexed about Honoka’s feelings for him.

However, he felt that to avoid turning what she said clumsily on the roof that day to waste, he had to reply her sincerely in his own way.

Honoka was unable to say anything, her face as red as a beetroot as she took large steps away from him.

“N-NOOOOOO!! FORGET ABOUT IT!!!”

She cupped her head and squatted down, almost bursting into tears.

“Oh my, you made a girl’s face so red, Mr. Akagi. What kind of delicate sweet words did you say to her?”

“I did not!”

“Koremitsu, you really have improved in your skills. I really am worried for the future.”

Tsuyako and Hikaru teased him, Michiru watched on with her eyes wide, and Honoka was flailing her limbs about, telling herself, “Idiot idiot idiot, seriously, I’m never going to believe you again” Koremitsu was very intrigued that he was in the middle of this noisy commotion; his chest was prickly, but it was not a bad feeling.

Could he continue with such times with them in this place after school? Just when he was wondering about this, he saw Hikaru show a gentle smile, and

suddenly had a chill in his heart.

–Were you lonely when Hikaru died?

At that time, he could not answer that question.

If Hikaru were to vanish in front of his sights.

As he wondered, Koremitsu’s body began to descend upon a lull of silence.

Ah, if that moment is to arrive, I’ll be really lonely.

My heart will be in anguish, to a point of nondescript, like a part of my body was taken away completely.

But even so, there definitely will be something to make up for my encounter with him.

Right now, he shall continue to be with this guy.

To enjoy, to chit-chat, and play together.

While this harem prince who brought lots of encounters and emotions to Koremitsu, the prince who brought lots of trouble to him, was still on the Earth–

♢ ♢ ♢

“I heard Mr. Akagi was very proactive this time.”

“…”

Asai ignored Hiina, who had come to disturb her, as she walked silently down the empty corridor.

“Isn’t it about time for you to recognize Mr. Akagi’s existence, president?”

“Impossible”

Yes, it was impossible.

It seemed to be the same thing regarding the matter of him officially joining the Japanese Dance Club Tsuyako had randomly created…

No matter what the reason was, Asai had no intention of showing pity to Tsuyako, who obeyed Kazuaki and forced Aoi into despair.

Even till this point, whenever Aoi thought about what happened back then, she would shudder from time to time. It seemed she was majorly affected by how feeble she was. She was frustrated.

For some reason, T
ōjō, who really doted on Aoi, found out about this incident, and was furious at Kazuaki.

And then, he said to Asai.

–I already felt that Kazuaki does not have what it takes to be the leader; he is not only his mother's puppet, but also a monster with a much more hideous nature. The
T
ōjōs are going to follow the 'Wisteria' and not the 'Rose'.

–Are you not going to ally with me, Asai? There probably is not too much of a difference between your objective and my objective.

Asai pondered as she dealt with Hiina.

Her expression gradually stiffening as a result.

To Asai, an alliance with the T
ōjōs would have its advantages.

Kazuaki might take action against Aoi again, and there was a need to crush him completely.

However…

Kazuaki was mistaken about one thing.

And it was a cruel truth to Aoi.

The truth was that Aoi was not Hikaru’s ‘most beloved’–

♢ ♢ ♢

“Such a barbaric man, Third Princess.”

Kazuaki spoke to the chameleon in the cage with a rich, sweet voice.

The reptile had a stoic look and green scales, feasting on the fly Kazuaki fed it with its long tongue. Kazuaki himself was in ecstasy as he watched this scene, his eyes narrowed.

“He actually hit my face. This is unforgivable.”

There was still a bruise below his eyes and around his nose. The innerside of his upper lip was cracked, and whenever he tried to eat or drink anything, he felt a pain.

Whenever that happened, the hatred for the red-haired sharp-eyed youth intensified.

“I shall make him kneel at my feet one of these days.”

Kazuaki left the cage, and lit the fragrance stove.

“I am really looking forward to that day.”

White smoke came out, and a faint aroma floated in the room.

It was the beginning of the ritual to summon ‘Roku
jō’.

He stood in front of the full length mirror, swapped his shirt and pants for a red summer dress, put on the black glossy hair, added some concealer and cosmetic foundation on his bruise, scattered some powder, drew his eyebrows, curled his eyelashes, and put on some lipsticks, gradually becoming a ‘woman’.

Shown in the mirror was a black-haired slender figure, the embodiment of the spider.

With a mystifying smile, Kazuaki muttered,

“Hey, Hikaru, I want to be prettier than any of the flowers in your garden.”

Footnotes

Your ‘most beloved’ should be me.

For that is because I am the one closest to you, the one who got hurt for you, the one who suffered for you, the one who changed her fate for you

That is why, your ‘most beloved’, should be me.

Special Chapter

She was shocked to find that he turned his head around like Hikaru–

“Eh, he’s going out again!?”

Shioriko raised her voice as she wiped the dishes Koharu washed with a dry cloth.

“Where? Where’s he going to? Did Big Brother Koremitsu say anything.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe he has an outing with some friends at school. He did go out at night in uniform before too.”

It’s worth celebrating if that guy is finally able to make some friends.
Koremitsu’s aunt, Koharu, said coldly with her lips curled into a frown, her eyes raised just like her nephew.

Shioriko however was unhappy about it.

(Uu, the weather’s so good today. I wanted to ask him to bring me out somewhere. If only I had agreed with Koremitsu–since he doesn’t have any friends, and is really free, I forgot about it.)

What friends? Probably a girl?

(No, Big Brother Koremitsu isn’t the type to be popular with the girls. He looks like a hoodlum, so crude when talking, arrogant in attitude, and he’ll say things everyone normally doesn’t say without a care.)

At first, Shioriko herself thought that he was such an annoying, frustrating person.

It was really unbelievable that he was actually Hikaru’s friend.

But when Shioriko was really feeling lonely, anguished, Koremitsu gave his all to help her.

When Shioriko’s only kin, her grandfather died, he took her in as his ‘little sister’.

She would never forget the moment when Koremitsu came for her after she was adopted by Kuze.

The Akagis had terrifying looks, whether it was the grandfather Masakaze or the aunt Koharu, and they were brash talkers, but they naturally showed concern for Shioriko. She also got along well with the aloof white cat Lapis, living with the Akagis. Though she had not lived with the Akagis for too long, she really liked this house and the residents in it.

And especially Koremitsu.

—

When I grow up you'll take my virginity in Hikaru's stead.

She whispered at his ear with her back straight. Koremitsu's eyes widened, and panicked.

–Shiiko, don't say such things.

And so, she was lectured by the grim-looking Koremitsu.

–Such things, as in?

She pretended to play the fool, causing Koremitsu to blush and groan.

If she were to press the issue with him directly, the ever-serious Koremitsu will keep his guard up around her. Thus, she decided to keep the 'promise' in her heart for the time being.

"Big Brother Koremitsu", Shioriko had her own reasons for calling him this.

There definitely must have been others who would call him 'Akagi' or 'Koremitsu', but nobody else would probably call him 'big brother'. Because of this, by calling him 'big brother', Shioriko would be a special girl to Koremitsu.

And also, she would have a warm, fuzzy, comfortable feeling whenever she called him then…

She thought it might be a good him like this.

Right, even if she were to become his lover, become his bride, at this point, she wanted to enjoy the thrill of being his ‘little sister’. In that case, her relationship with Koremitsu will improve.

But Koremitsu had abandoned such a cute little sister by the wayside, and has been looking really busy recently.

Whenever he was in the room alone, he would mutter to himself, sometimes even cupping his head, groaning, or murmuring and blushing. Even when Shioriko really wanted to play with him, and approached him innocently, he would chase her off saying, ‘ah, I’m busy now. Wait’

But this time, she clearly had the attitude of ‘I must do it today!’.

(If-If he’s going out on a date with another girl, I won’t forgive him.)

After helping Koharu, Shioriko peeked in on Koremitsu.

Just when Koremitsu was tying his sneaker laces at the door, she approached him from behind with Lapis in her arms, tugged at his shoulder, and looked

devastated, saying,

“You’re going out again, Big Brother? I thought I could be with you today.”

Her eyes were teary.

She was really good at shedding crocodile tears.

Koremitsu in turn looked sheepish as he said, “I’ll play with you tomorrow.”

“But…we can be together today. Can’t I go out with you…? I’ll be obedient.”

“Th-That won’t do. I’ll be with you the whole day tomorrow, Shiiko. Play around with Lapis for today. Gramps will be happy if you play 5-in-a-row with him.”

“…Hm.”

‘Tch’. She thought in her heart, but nodded with a lonely, honest look. In a tactical sense, it was a mistake for her to try and make him stay by fawning at him.

The next conquest would be easier if she were to trigger Koremitsu’s guilt here.

But even so,

(Why must you leave me behind and go out yourself? Big Brother Koremitsu, you big dummy!)

Shioriko was unable to restrain her anger, made a funny face at Koremitsu's back, gritting her teeth, 'ii–' and making such a sound.

And Koremitsu turned back.

"!"

Shioriko was taken aback, her breathing nearly ceasing.

When Hikaru was still alive, he would turn his head back at the opportune moment wheneer she did a funny face, pointed the middle finger, or raised her lips, and would beam at her as she fluster.

At this moment, Koremitsu thoroughly resembled Hikaru.

The sight of the golden, transparent hair swayed freely, and the smiling Hikaru overlapped with Koremitsu's body for an instant.

Once that scene vanished, Shioriko found herself exchanging looks with the speechless Koremitsu, and her face sizzled.

Why? Why did he turn his head around like Hikaru? Big Brother's very dull-witted, and he doesn't know anything about a girl's heart!

Why did he suddenly look at me! This is too convenient for me!

She even felt a blazing heat deep within her eyes.

"idiot!"

Shioriko then turned away and ran to her own room.

"Ahhh~~~~~"

Shioriko hid in a corner of the room with Lapis in her arms, flailing her legs around.

It's just Big Brother Koremitsu, but he looked back, he looked back, he looked back.

As her embrace was too hard, Lapis was unable to bear with it anymore, and escaped.

“Humph, I-I won’t lose.”

Right, summer break was about to begin.

In that case, she was to make Koremitsu pay for all he had owed her.

She had a change of mood, placed her favorite grassy green notebook on her knees, opened it, and wrote down her summer plans with a sky blue pen.

Release some fireworks with Big Brother, eat shaved ice with Big Brother, eat the flowing noodles with Big Brother, watch the Morning Glories bloom with Big Brother, catch a beetle bug with Big Brother, do morning exercises with Big Brother.

“Next is…”

Right, this was something she could not omit.

She showed an innocent child-like smile, and wrote large words in the middle of the notebook.

“Go to the pool with Big Brother.”

Author's Notes

Hello, this is Mizuki Nomura.
The 4th volume of “When Hikaru Was On Earth” is about the sister-in-law, Lady Oborodukiyo! The encounter during the ‘Flower Feast’ chapter was really elegant and sweet, causing my heart to race.
I suppose the readers back then, the noble Princesses felt excited about the dangerous love between Hikaru Genji and Oborodukiyo. That princess is about to be the concubine of his older brother, and she is also the princess of the rivalling Udate clan. Shikibu Murasaki truly is able to construct a scene all girls yearn for, and I really marvel at it every single time.
Regarding Oborodukiyo, there are differing opinions from different people whenever I read the translated works or the works based on ‘The Tale of Genji’, and this one is interesting. Some said she is a vibrant, carefree female, some says she is a princess who fell in love; every single explanation, I think, is brilliant.
Miss Tsuyako in this series is an upperclassman. Miss Takeoka’s character design is really splendid, and I cannot help but be amazed by how alluring she is when I received the cover draft (colored). The trendy flowers of the Heian era were the mountain cherry blossoms, but I feel that Tsuyako is different, so I swapped it for the red weeping cherry blossom. In my hometown, there is a red weeping cherry blossom tree that is over a thousand years old; whenever spring came, I would board the train together with my school friends or club upperclassmen on a picnic, watching the trees at the same time. We were always amazed by the dignified beauty.
At my current place, the cherry blossom trees by the river will bloom in unison when it comes to spring, and will be

basking in the sea of flower petals. The cherry blossoms in the day provide a nice contrast to the sky, but it is riveting to see the night cherry blossoms glitter weakly in the darkness.
I suppose the reason why the Japanese cherry blossoms are so special to the Japanese is definitely because it is closely related to our personal memories.
The cherry blossoms continue to flutter and fall, whether it is when we stroll by the river, having the feeling of 'this is the best day of my life!' in the night, or walk in a crowd during the noon, almost breaking into tears thinking it is the end of the world.
'Oborodukiyo' is set in summer, I began work on this volume during the previous autumn, and the release date is at the end of Spring. To those living in the northern provinces, the cherry blossoms are about to bloom, I suppose. If this volume of mine is able to bring you delight and comfort like the feeling of marvelling at the cherry blossoms, I will feel ever so blissful.
The audio drama CD of 'Hikaru' is currently under work. The content is supposed to be original, and with that thought, I think it will be best if it is related to the next volume 'Suetsumuhana' rather than a completely independent story, so I began work in that pace. In this story, Koremitsu is finally taking the challenge of wooing girls on the streets. I really hope that the content of this story will allow everyone to realize 'ah, so that's what's going on' when they read 'Suetsumuhana'.
The voice actors have been chosen carefully, but the voices of both Koremitsu and Hikaru are really, really hard to do! Especially Koremitsu! If he sounds too shrill, it makes him too impish, but if he uses a deep voice, he will sound like an old man…I guess however that I can definitely bring the best actors to everyone.

There are 5 characters that appear. As for who they are, I shall let everyone guess and anticipate. The release date should be around the same time as ‘Suetsumuhana’, at the end of summer. Please pay attention to the Famitsu Publishing main page. Maybe something is decided by the time this volumes is published.
And speaking of Suetsumuhana, it is the code name of the girl with that kind of appearance, but how will the cover look like? I am really looking forward to seeing Miss Takeoka’s illustration.
Now then, let us meet again in volume 5 of ‘When Hikaru Was On The Earth…… Suetsumuhana’.
March 10th, 2011
Mizuki Nomura.
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